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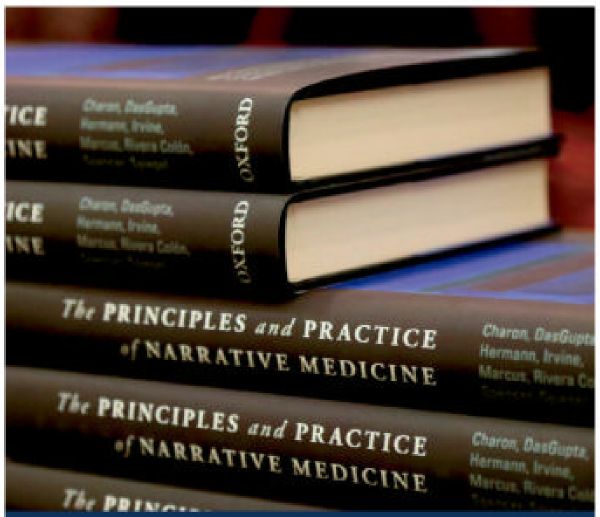
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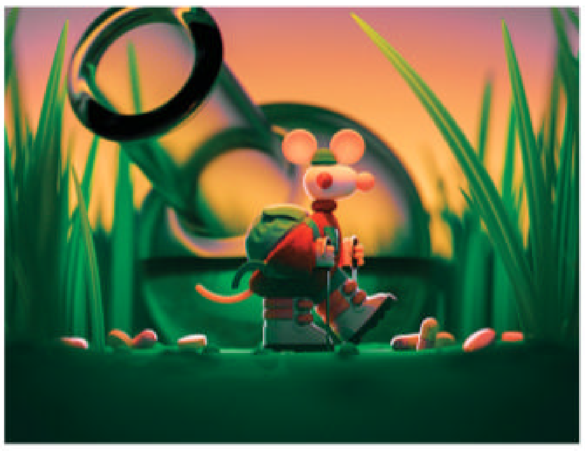
Jennifer Homans (*Dancing, p. 66*), the magazine's dance critic, published "Mr. B: George Balanchine's 20th Century" in November.

Edward Steed (*Cover*) has contributed cartoons to *The New Yorker* since 2013.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

PHOTO BOOTH

In our series on a year of war in Ukraine, Joshua Yaffa looks at Russian attacks on the country's power grid.



ANNALS OF INQUIRY

Sonia Shah writes about the scientific case for letting lab mice lead less sterile and more natural lives.

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LEFT: SASHA MASLOV; RIGHT: LAURIE ROWAN

THE MAIL

THE REAL LYDIA TÁR

In Michael Schulman's interview with the director Todd Field, Field speculated that the fictional protagonist of his new movie, the conductor Lydia Tár, might have lied about studying with our father, Leonard Bernstein (Notes on Hollywood, January 14th, www.newyorker.com/tar). As representatives of Bernstein's estate, and in the spirit of the ongoing hubbub over the film, we can assure Field that his heroine was a teen-age prodigy whose talents were so formidable that she was granted special permission to be one of Bernstein's conducting students at Tanglewood in the summer of 1990, during the final year of Bernstein's life. His impact on her artistry is indelible, down to her churning "washing machine" movements, an intriguing adaptation of Bernstein's legendary podium style.

Field added, "It would be good for the Bernstein estate to let [Tár] lie about her association with Leonard Bernstein . . . because the optics of that association would be very, very good, given that she's a woman." If Field meant to imply that Bernstein's reputation could benefit from an affiliation with female conductors, Tár herself, as Bernstein's most famous protégée, could point out that he taught both women and men. He also introduced millions of girls and boys to the joy of music through his televised Young People's Concerts, the very ones Tár obsessively watched on videocassette. Bernstein inspired thousands of viewers to dedicate themselves to music—precisely what happened to Tár.

Jamie, Alexander, and Nina Bernstein
New York City

ATTENTION SPANS

Casey Cep's review of Jamie Kreiner's book "The Wandering Mind," about medieval monks and distraction, reminded me of an illustrative experience of my own (Books, January 30th). While working as a financial consultant for Silicon Valley startup companies, I also volunteered as the head of a Benedictine school's finance committee. One busy week, I presented annual financial plans to three different startups' boards of directors, each made up of venture capitalists, as well as to the Benedictine school's board, which consisted of five monks. The meetings could not have been more different. As I went through my PowerPoint slides, the startup boards were distracted, as usual—texting, talking, asking the occasional non-sequitur question. The monks, in contrast, were fully present. I walked them through the numbers in great detail while they posed thoughtful and intelligent questions. It forced me to be at the top of my game, and was a memorable pleasure.

Keith Van Sickle
Menlo Park, Calif.

MASCULINITY CRISIS

As a professor of child development, I read Idrees Kahloon's piece on the difficulties faced by men and boys with great interest (Books, January 30th). My own recent research on young men has been largely data-driven; at many universities, the most salient characteristic of the people struggling the most is that they identify as males. It's taken an unfortunate amount of work to get people, even in my highly educated circle, to recognize the issue. I understand the resistance, which is often based on a genuine ignorance of the problem, political sensibilities, or even the feeling that this is somehow the just deserts of our culture's misogyny. But, once I paint a picture of what society could look like when an ever-higher percentage of men are undereducated, underemployed, and looking for someone to blame, most people appreciate that this is an outcome we should strive to avoid.

Ioakim Boutakidis
Claremont, Calif.

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

Ever since Nora, the heroine of Henrik Ibsen's proto-feminist masterwork **"A Doll's House,"** from 1879, walked out on her husband and out of her domestic cage, actresses have yearned to play her. Jessica Chastain (above, center), last year's Best Actress Oscar winner, steps into the role for a sixteen-week Broadway run, now in previews at the Hudson, opening March 9. Jamie Lloyd directs a new adaptation, by Amy Herzog, featuring (from left to right) Arian Moayed ("Succession") and Okieriete Onaodowan ("Hamilton").

PHOTOGRAPH BY SEBASTIAN KIM

As ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

MUSIC

Bill Crow

JAZZ As an impeccable bassist, Bill Crow laid down a granite foundation for the élite of the cool-jazz school, including Gerry Mulligan and Stan Getz, plus a host of mainstream luminaries, all of whom benefitted from his unerring swing. Yet this trusted journeyman is also a man of words, and a veritable Boswell for jazz. His two volumes of the prosaically titled but treasured "Jazz Anecdotes," as well as the memoir "From Birdland to Broadway," collected tales that might have been lost in the ether of time and legend, humanizing iconic figures and providing plenty of behind-the-scenes insight and laughs. This hearty nonagenarian leads a septet whose baritone saxophone-trumpet-trombone front line and full rhythm section speak of Mulliganesque gambits and tonal opulence.—*Steve Futterman (Dizzy's Club; Feb. 26.)*

Dweller

TECHNO The d.j. and live-performance lineup of the fourth Dweller festival, an all-Black, intergenerational dance-music showcase, is jam-packed. A twenty-four-hour, Saturday-into-Sunday party, at Nowadays, spotlights the Detroit house elder Al Ester and the British experimental-electronics phenom Loraine James; other late-night sessions feature drum-'n'-bass stars Sinistarr, at Bossa Nova Civic Club, and dBridge, at Nowadays. But many of the most promising events in the series take place in the early evening, for a seated crowd. Among this year's attractions are a roundtable headlined by the techno d.j. and soundtrack composer Jeff Mills and a sit-down with the elusive Detroit techno legends Underground Resistance.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Various venues; Feb. 22-26.)*

Ledisi

R. & B. Patti LaBelle once called Ledisi one of the best vocalists that she'd ever heard—par for the course for this singer's singer. After playing in the jazz band Slide Five, leading the funk group Anibade, and releasing the aptly titled independent album "Soulsinger," Ledisi found a balanced, full-bodied R. & B. sound that scored her a deal with Verve, in 2006. Since releasing her major-label début, "Lost & Found," she has made good on an omnivorous musical appetite, whether singing backup for Prince or making a funk album inspired by Buddy Miles. Throughout it all, the music is powered by her sweeping voice, which creates the texture and the dimension of Baroque brushwork. At Carnegie Hall, she revisits her album "Ledisi Sings Nina," fronting a thirty-piece orchestra, performing the works of Nina Simone.—*Sheldon Pearce (Carnegie Hall; Feb. 23.)*

"Lohengrin"

OPERA Wagner's "Lohengrin," the last opera he completed before revolutionizing his style with epic music dramas like the "Ring" cycle and "Tristan und Isolde," begins with some of the most resplendent music he ever wrote, a prelude of glistening strings and angelic woodwinds meant to evoke the Holy Grail. The composer turned to the Grail legend again for his final opera, "Parsifal," a sprawling, religiose, philosophical work, but "Lohengrin" is more traditional, with a tenor that saves a soprano from the vengeful machinations of lower-voiced villains. The French Canadian director François Girard, whose post-apocalyptic "Parsifal" came to the Metropolitan Opera in 2013, stages "Lohengrin" as something of a sequel, with a first-rate cast, led by Piotr Beczała, Tamara Wilson, Christine Goerke, and Evgeny Nikitin. Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducts.—*Oussama Zahr (Metropolitan Opera House; select dates Feb. 26-April 1.)*

Otoboke Beaver

PUNK For a group that favors breakneck dissonance and piercing screams, the Japanese quartet Otoboke Beaver has exhibited impressive longevity. After coming together, in 2009, at a Kyoto University music club, the band released a series of throttling singles and EPs before finding an international audience, in 2017. Using shrieks as instruments, with an absolute disregard for time signatures, Otoboke Beaver evokes the punk forebears Kleenex/LiLiPUT, who incinerated all formulas. The musicians cite hardcore punk and Japanese pop as influences, as well as their country's *manzai* comedy tradition. Good will abounds for Otoboke Beaver: the surviving members of Nirvana are both fans, with the video for "Don't Light My Fire" as a favorite. The band's latest LP, "Super Champon," from 2022, contains such blunt titles as "I Am Not Maternal" and "I Won't Dish Out Salads," and the group's most deliberate embrace of feminist rage.—*Jenn Pelly (Le Poisson Rouge; Feb. 22-23.)*

ART

Hans Haacke

Decades before the term "artwashing" was coined to describe cultural philanthropy's role in corporate P.R. campaigns, this German-born, New York-based Conceptualist was exposing the hidden dynamics of patronage. This focussed presentation of Haacke's work is titled for his piece "Taking Stock, 1975-1985," in which a gilt-framed oil portrait of Margaret Thatcher represents more than a symbol of empire and austerity—it reveals the political influence of the advertising mogul and art collector

ROOTS

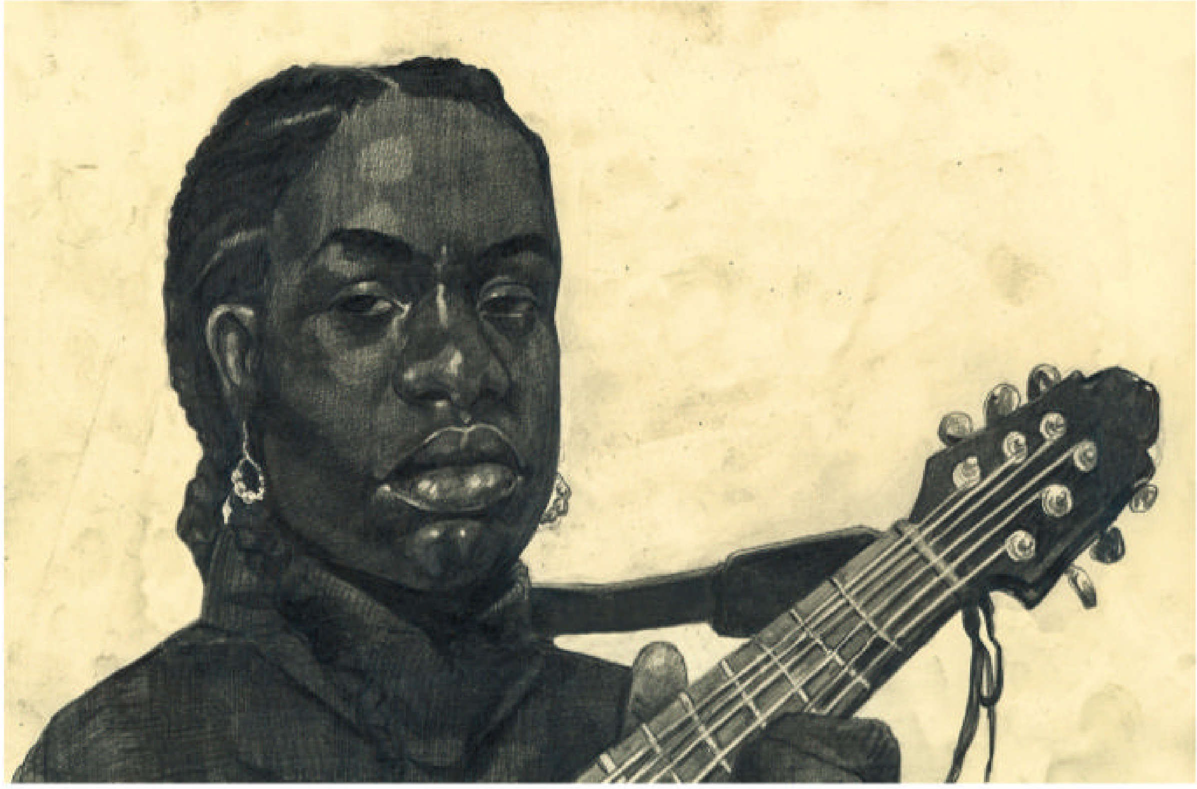

ILLUSTRATION BY JULIAN ADON ALEXANDER

"Anarchist Gospel," a wistful new LP by **Sunny War,** was created with an aerodynamic Nashville band that smooths the singer's edges, yet the record still revels in taking unexpected turns. Throughout, War skates between worlds, tucking gospel choruses behind ransacking guitars and choosing a melancholic ballad to quote the sloganeering British punks Crass. With a mischievous twinkle, she covers Ween—an ostensible children's choir helps her through the lyrics "Fuck you, you stinking ass ho"—dropping the song amid her own compositions like a stench bomb in a tulip field. Reared in Nashville and in Los Angeles, the musician stared down assorted horrors—homelessness, addiction, Ween fandom—before emerging as an ascendant voice in roots music. Speaking onstage, she emits a demure energy, but the moment she enters a song any diffidence melts. At Joe's Pub on Feb. 22, War opens her national tour, tracing intricate circles with her guitar while her singing remains an island of calm.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

AT THE GALLERIES

COURTESY THE ARTIST / LUHRING AUGUSTINE

The best artists do more than reflect their own time—they are also attuned to the future. Take **Charles Atlas,** a New York-based maverick who has been working at the crossroads of moving images and moving bodies for fifty years. In the seventies, as the filmmaker-in-residence for Merce Cunningham's company, Atlas helped pioneer a proto-TikTok genre known as "media dance," with choreography conceived for the camera rather than for the stage. (Unlike movie-musical numbers, which serve a plot, TikTokers mirror, however unwittingly, Cunningham's ethos of dance for dance's sake.) In the early eighties, Atlas struck out on his own and pitched a project to the BBC—a profile of London's latest dance sensation. What he neglected to mention was that the wildly charismatic Michael Clark, a twenty-one-year-old with the body of a ballet virtuoso and the soul of a punk, was then completely unknown. (Clark's cohort included such eventual legends as the performance artist Leigh Bowery and the singer Mark E. Smith, of the Fall.) By the time Atlas's film, "Hail the New Puritan"—a fly-on-the-wall fiction, disguised as a documentary—aired, in 1986, Clark had become an avant-garde star. In Atlas's enthralling video installation "A Prune Twin" (an anagram of "New Puritan"), from 2020, on view at the Luhring Augustine gallery through March 11, the artist excerpts footage from that groundbreaking film, and from a related 1989 project, "Because We Must" (pictured above). The result is a media dance in its own right, as scenes formerly confined to a single channel traverse eight screens in two rooms—and invite you to move with them—for twenty exquisite, outrageous, time-bending minutes.—*Andrea K. Scott*

Charles Saatchi, whose firm helmed Thatcher's campaigns. Another piece, from 1975, is a forensic examination of the provenance of Georges Seurat's painting "Les Poseuses (Small Version)." In fourteen panels of text, Haacke traces the canvas's journey from Seurat's studio, in 1888, to a million-dollar auction bid, in 1970, by an investment holding company, and beyond. In another work from 1975, titled "On Social Grease," six plaques are photo-engraved with quotes from corporate bigwigs, including an Exxon executive who notes that art serves as a business-friendly "social lubricant." But the artist's once radical strategy doesn't hit quite as hard now, as climate activists make a splash in museums with their guerrilla actions.—*Johanna Fateman (Paula Cooper; through Feb. 25.)*

"It's Personal"

Three young artists—friends, all trans women—convene an intimate public conversation, via their disparate works, in a gallery that occupies a glass-walled booth in a Chinatown mall. The space's fishbowl quality suits the themes of gendered spectatorship explored in a poetic text by Hannah Baer that accompanies this beguiling show. "Who gets to look at women and girls, who gets to look inside women and girls" are among the litany of questions it poses. A row of photographs by Sam Penn offers a window onto a glam coterie in the tradition of Nan Goldin. (The writer Thora Siemsen, a frequent subject of Goldin's, appears here, underscoring the association.) Nash Glynn exhibits a pair of paintings: a nude, seated on a draped chair, is seen in a landscape at dusk; a still-life of a rose in a bud vase floats in a scarcely articulated, metaphysical space. Ser Serpas, whose conceptual work is often site-specific and made from castaway objects, presents canvases tacked to the wall. One offers a dilated view of a torso, with a nipple that confronts the visitor's gaze like an enormous eye.—*J.F. (OCD Chinatown; through March 19.)*

"Swagger & Tenderness: John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres"

Part of what makes this show at the Bronx Museum so remarkable is that it reminds you of two things that made New York City, predevelopment, so remarkable: chance and faith. Back in 1961, Jane Jacobs presciently argued that urban planning came at a terrible price: by obliterating communities, you obliterated the happy accidents and impromptu encounters that might expand your understanding of both an individual and a community as a whole. John Ahearn, in collaboration with Rigoberto Torres, makes plaster-cast sculptures of Black and Hispanic people he has known and admired in the four decades that he's worked in the South Bronx. He captures some of what Jacobs celebrated: the intelligence that goes into not only surviving the streets but making them feel like home. Ahearn is a great colorist, and although the skin tones of his subjects are true to life, they're also the product of his hyperrealist brush, and of his fascination with what makes a body, what makes a face, and what goes into self-representation. You can't look at an early work like "Luis and Virginia Arroyo" (1980), which shows a husband and wife in a warm embrace, and not see how much of themselves the subjects gave to the project, and how much Ahearn wanted to repay that trust—a spiritual exchange that amounts to an object lesson in faith.—*Hilton Als (Bronx Museum; through April 30.)*

DANCE

New York City Ballet

"The Sleeping Beauty," which premièred in St. Petersburg in 1890, is considered by many to be the greatest classical ballet, for its gleaming and varied score by Tchaikovsky, and for the great challenge and poetry of its steps. The Rose Adagio, in which a ballerina balances on one foot as four partners come and go, is still considered one of the ultimate tests in ballerinadom. The choreography, by Marius Petipa, has undergone innumerable adaptations over the decades. N.Y.C.B.'s production, from 1991, is by the company's former director, Peter Martins. He sped up the ballet's leisurely pace and streamlined the story; some secondary scenes—less important, but part of the original fabric—have been cut. But the basic structure and many of the ballet's wonderful set pieces, including a jewel of a waltz for a large group of dancers holding garlands, remain. The waltz is by Balanchine—Martins embedded it in his own production, like a good-luck charm. "The Sleeping Beauty" is performed in the final week of the company's winter season.—*Marina Harss (David H. Koch Theatre; through Feb. 26.)*

Michela Marino Lerman

As part of the Harlem Stage series "Black Arts Movement: Examined," the masterly tap dancer Michela Marino Lerman reimagines "We Insist! Freedom Now Suite," an unaccommodating jazz album that Max Roach made with Abbey Lincoln, in 1960. For this project, Lerman's band, Love Movement, includes the talented hoofers Orlando Hernández and Roxanne King, and, crucially, a topnotch singer, Charenee Wade, and drummer, Jeff (Tain) Watts.—*Brian Seibert (Harlem Stage; Feb. 24-25.)*

Dean Moss

This veteran experimentalist tends to make complicated, provocative, theatrical works with lots of moving pieces. He returns to Danspace Project with something sparer, the long-gestating "Your marks and surface," joined by only one other dancer, Sawami Fukuoka. As usual, audience participation is involved.—*B.S. (Danspace Project; Feb. 23-25.)*

Versa-Style Dance Company

The name of this Los Angeles-based troupe celebrates a stylistic smorgasbord—breaking, krump, house, popping and locking, salsa, merengue, cumbia. Empowerment is the aim. Formed in 2005, the company makes its Joyce début with "Freemind Freestyle," a collection of group numbers, battles, and improvisational solo turns. An m.c. draws out themes of oppression and freedom.—*B.S. (Joyce Theatre; Feb. 21-25.)*

THE THEATRE

Lucy

The noirish shadows that lace Amy Rubin's impeccably detailed set capture "Lucy"'s essence, evoking the perils that loom, just out of sight, over middle-class motherhood. As a single mom with a fifty-hour work week, Mary (a sympathetically neurotic Brooke Bloom) has it rough. That's why she hires Ashling (Lynn Collins) as a nanny for her daughter, Lucy, and the baby boy Mary's expecting. Ashling is a free spirit—maybe too free, draping herself over the furniture and drinking Mary's wine. (In fairness, if your employer welcomed you with "a study guide to my kid," you might need a drink, too.) She and Mary slip into a power struggle, complete with gaslighting and hints of sexual predation. But Erica Schmidt's drama, though well written, never fulfills its dark promise. When this Audible production ends, it feels like there's a scene or two missing—a shortcoming all the more disappointing given the virtuosity of Bloom's performance.—*Dan Stahl (Minetta Lane Theatre; through Feb. 25.)*

The Wanderers

At one point in "The Wanderers"—a new play by Anna Ziegler, directed by Barry Edelstein for Roundabout Theatre Company—the lovesick, increasingly deluded Abe (Eddie Kaye Thomas), a novelist, sends an e-mail to the object of his affection which reads: "Maybe I'll just keep writing to you—years of one-sided correspondence. Isn't that really what being a novelist is, anyway?" "The Wanderers" tests his theory but displaces it onto drama, telling the tale of Abe's failing marriage to Sophie (Sarah Cooper), which he undermines by way of an epistolary exchange with a movie star, Julia Cheever (Katie Holmes). Woven throughout is the story of Abe's Orthodox Jewish parents, Schmuli (Dave Klasko) and Esther (Lucy Freyer). The show is insightful about the many follies of men of all ages, but its facets—past and present, secular and sacred—rarely manage to cohere enough to reach a place beyond clichés.—*Vinson Cunningham (Laura Pels; through April 2.)*

Wolf Play

Hansol Jung's tale, about six-year-old Jeenu, a traumatized adoptee who believes he is a wolf, is based on the real world of unregulated adoptions, in which children pass from hand to hand via online groups, sometimes falling out of the caring world forever. It's a surprise, then, that "Wolf Play" is actually a strangely buoyant experience. Jeenu, whose Koreanness is ignored by even his most well-meaning caretakers, is played by a rudimentary wooden puppet (operated by Mitchell Winter) who eats puppet cereal (puffs of milklike cotton balls) and depends on others for everything, even the illusion that he's alive. His first adoptive father, Peter (Christopher Bannow), dumps him, then has second thoughts, but by then new parents Ash (Esco Jouléy, in superb form) and Robin (Nicole Villamil), as well as Robin's pugilistic brother, Ryan (Brian Quijada), have started to form their own attachments. The show is a remount, following a 2022 run at SoHo Rep, although the director Dustin Wills's playful, all-the-strings-visible production looks totally comfortable, as if it grew out of the walls at MCC. An extended magic-of-imagination opening monologue, spoken by Winter, the puppeteer, doesn't quite work, but the rest of the piercing drama (someone in front of me literally could not bear to watch) covers an astonishing amount of ground, carrying itself lightly when the terrain is most difficult.—*Helen Shaw (Susan & Ronald Frankel Theatre; through March 19.)*

MOVIES

Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania

The latest installment in this Marvel cycle is a family affair, involving five people and

OFF BROADWAY

ILLUSTRATION BY KEITH NEGLEY

Anton Chekhov knew that a lazy sojourn in the country could bring out all sorts of vanities, jealousies, and longings—but so do New Yorkers heading back to the city on I-87. In **"The Seagull/Woodstock, NY,"** the provocateur-playwright Thomas Bradshaw resets Chekhov's tragicomedy from the Russian countryside to the hippie mecca of the Hudson Valley, where an assortment of theatre people converge at a house, hoping in vain to escape their troubles. Parker Posey, a perpetually undertapped resource, gets the plum role of the actress Irina Arkadina, now Irene. The rest of Scott Elliott's cast is just as chic, including Ato Essandoh ("Garden State"), Nat Wolff ("The Naked Brothers Band"), Patrick Foley ("Circle Jerk"), the veteran solo artist David Cale, and the droll glamazon Hari Nef. The New Group's production, currently in previews, opens on Feb. 28, at Pershing Square Signature Center.—*Michael Schulman* three generations. The action starts in San Francisco, where Scott Lang, a.k.a. Ant-Man (Paul Rudd), and Hope van Dyne, known as the Wasp (Evangeline Lilly), get zapped down into the subatomic Quantum Realm, together with Scott's teen-scientist daughter, Cassie (Kathryn Newton), and Hope's parents, Dr. Hank Pym (Michael Douglas) and Janet van Dyne (Michelle Pfeiffer). In that infinitesimal microverse, the quintet merely seeks a technological path to return home, but the group gets caught in local infighting—primarily involving a tyrannical quantumaniac called Kang the Conqueror (Jonathan Majors) and the efforts of a principled leader named Jentorra (Katy M. O'Brian) to resist him. Jeff Loveness's script offers a surprisingly compact plot that unfolds in a completely imaginary world that, unfortunately, remains poorly defined—socially, politically, biologically, and geographically. Though the director, Peyton Reed, adds touches of wry humor, the movie dispenses its story mechanically and offers few thrills or stylistic delights. Only Majors's Shakespearean thunder and O'Brian's curt assertiveness escape the tale's confines; the best scene parodies the "Star Wars" cantina.—*Richard Brody (In theatrical release.)*

Bless Their Little Hearts

Billy Woodberry's only dramatic feature to date, from 1983, looks deeply into the life of one family in Watts and plots its crisis in three dimensions—race, money, and gender. Charlie Banks (Nate Hardman), first seen in an employment office, has been jobless for a decade and does day labor when he can get it. His wife, Andais (Kaycee Moore), is the family's main support, but, when it's time to give their three lively and helpful young children their allowance, she slips the coins to Charlie, for him to dole out as the nominal head of the household. Working with a script and cinematography by Charles Burnett, Woodberry crafts a passionately pensive realism—nearly every scene of action is matched by a long one in which characters, in observant repose, look back and see themselves reflected in society's mirror. Bruised by struggle, Charlie seeks comfort with a former girlfriend; Andais has it out with him in a terrifying scene of domestic apocalypse, a claustrophobic ten-minute take in which a lifetime of frustration bursts forth.—*R.B. (Streaming on the Criterion Channel, OVID, Kino Now, and other services.)*

Magic Mike's Last Dance

After eight years away, Mike Lane (Channing Tatum) is back, for the third film in the exotic-dance series. Having launched and lost his furniture company, Mike is in Miami, bartending at a charity gathering, when he's recruited by its wealthy hostess, Maxandra Mendoza Rattigan (Salma Hayek Pinault), for a private dance. After a one-night stand, she whisks him away to her home in London and gives him a job: transforming a stuffy drawing-room play, staged in her estranged husband's West End theatre, into a male strip show. Max and Mike stay apart but are clearly in love, and the plot's mechanisms—involving Max's devoted butler (Ayub Khan Din), her hyperliterary teen-age daughter (Jemelia George), and an overzealous bureaucrat (Vicki Pepperdine)—line up to bring them together. So does Mike's choreography, as he instructs a teeming cast of dancers in the art of seduction but finds that, for the grand finale, he must take the stage himself. Steven Soderbergh, who directed the first "Magic Mike" film, returns, too, but with little apparent conviction: the movie feels forced, even cynical, and has little logic, flair, or swing.—*R.B. (In theatrical release.)*

Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy

Tomas Alfredson directed this 2011 adaptation of John le Carré's 1974 novel—a complicated study, as dank and dense as undergrowth, of betrayal in the Britain of the Cold War. A treacherous Soviet mole, inserted deep into the Secret Intelligence Service, needs digging out, and so George Smiley (Gary Oldman), a former spy, is summoned from retirement to lead the hunt. The tale required many hours to unfold when it screened on television in the nineteen-seventies, and the cinematic version is, by definition, a brisker quest; perhaps, however, a certain patient pedantry was essential to Smiley's task, because the new adaptation seems duller and less enthralling. There are four main suspects, played by Toby Jones, Colin Firth, David Dencik, and Ciarán Hinds, but we don't have a chance to assess them one by one: hardly a great buildup to the final revelation. Still, the cast is expert and formidable, with roles for John Hurt, Tom Hardy, and Mark Strong, and the set decoration is a terrifying reminder of an entire era that devoted itself to brown.—*Anthony Lane (Streaming on Prime Video, Apple TV, and other services.)*

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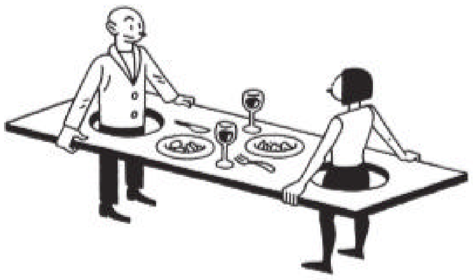
SCREENING AND STREAMING

COURTESY KINO LORBER

Marcel Ophuls's vast 1969 documentary, **"The Sorrow and the Pity,"** is one of the few movies that can rightly be said to have changed the course of history. (It opens Feb. 24 at Film Forum and is streaming on Milestone Films' site.) In the movie's four-hour span, the German-born director—who's now ninety-five and, after escaping Hitler's regime with his parents, in 1933, has lived mostly in France—reconstructs the history of the Second World War as experienced in France, from the German invasion of 1940 through the Liberation, with an emphasis on daily life under the Occupation in the city of Clermont-Ferrand. He does so by way of extensive interviews, which he films with a wide-ranging set of participants, including French Resistance fighters, collaborators with the Nazi occupiers, unrepentant former German officers, and even such major political figures as Pierre Mendès France and Anthony Eden. The movie's prime audacity was to refute France's self-serving myth of having been a nation of resisters. (As a result, the film, though intended for broadcast, was barred from French television until 1981.) In challenging that myth, Ophuls reveals the actual Resistance to have been all the more defiantly heroic, and he diagnoses the political pathologies—antisemitism, racism, and anti-communism—that underlaid French collaboration, and that were still very much in evidence in France.—*Richard Brody*



TABLES FOR TWO

Legacy Pizza: Naples vs. N.Y.C.

One of the newest additions to New York's ever-evolving pizza landscape is not so new at all, at least in terms of its pedigree. L'Antica Pizzeria da Michele opened in Naples in 1870 and has since garnered world renown. Fans of Elizabeth Gilbert's "Eat, Pray, Love" may remember it from both the book and the movie; in the latter, Julia Roberts, as Gilbert, declares that she is in a relationship with her margherita. In Naples just two pies are available at the very small, very casual restaurant—the margherita (tomato sauce and fior-di-latte mozzarella, with a bit of Pecorino and fresh basil) and the marinara (tomato sauce, sliced garlic, and dried oregano, no cheese). In the West Village (2 Bank St.)—and in Los Angeles, where the restaurant's first U.S. outpost opened in 2019—both the dining room and the menu are much bigger and more formal, with a half-dozen additional pizzas ($18-$65), plus appetizers, pastas, entrées, and dessert.

The margherita and the marinara are successful imports, cooked here in a domed brick oven, with guidance from a fifth-generation member of the pizzeria's founding family. Though the pies are much larger than their Naples counterparts, they bear clear evidence of a craftsmanship honed for more than a century. This is dough that won't let you down: incredibly pliable and stretchy, floppy but more than sturdy enough for its toppings (all sourced from Italy), and flavorful to boot, fermented for forty-eight hours, then flash-cooked until speckled with bubbles and char. The sauce lets the volcanic tomatoes speak for themselves, and the cheese captures the essence of the sweetest, grassiest milk.

The rest, for the most part, is noise. It turns out that you can have too much of even the most wonderful cheese, as proved by a heavy-handed white pizza and by another topped with pesto, tomatoes, and a large, awkward ball of burrata that reads like TikTok bait. Salads, including one with shaved artichoke and pistachio, and pastas (spaghetti cacio e pepe, maccheroni Bolognese) might be the best in town if the bar weren't so high in this particular town; we're certainly not in need of a Hamburger Italiano. An attempt at world domination comes, unsurprisingly, at the expense of humble charm.

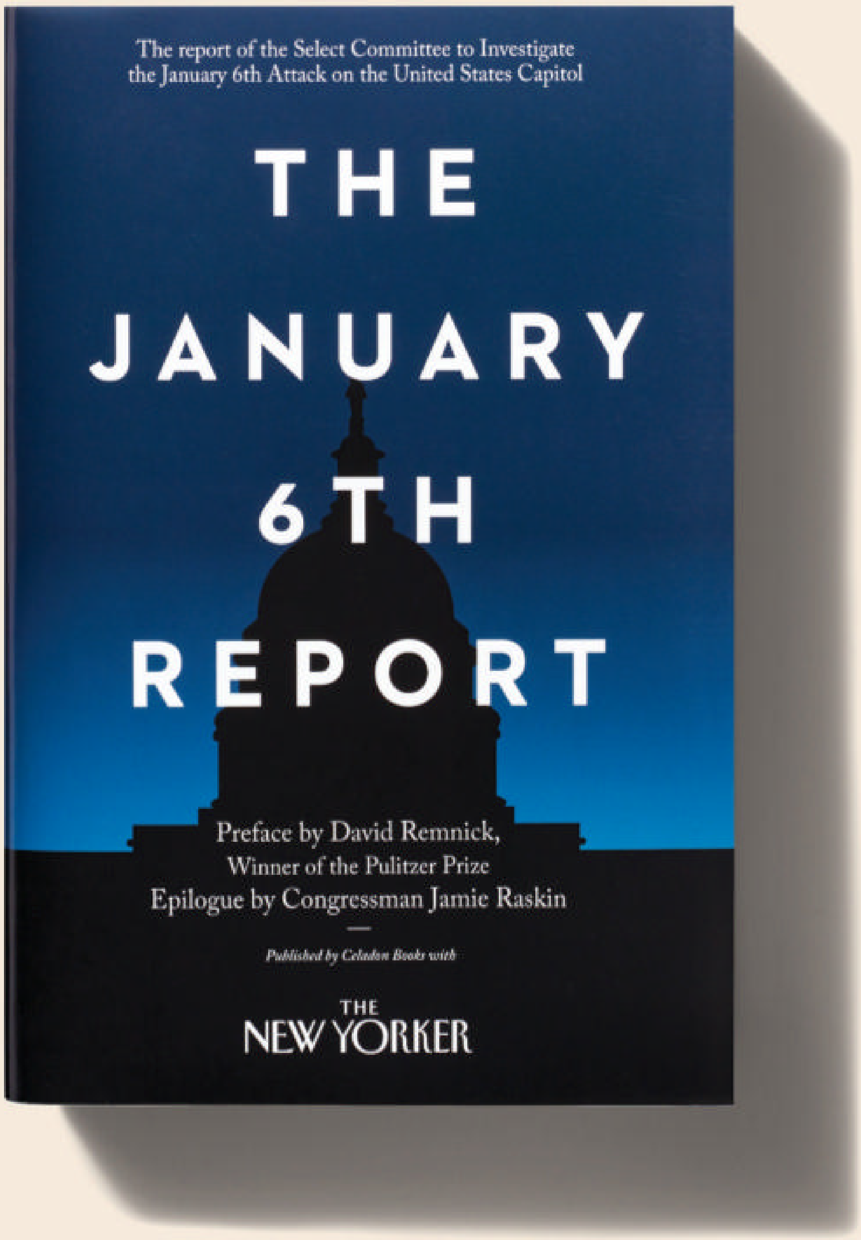
Luckily, New York has plenty of that. In 1974, an Italian immigrant named Angelo Carlino and his wife, Roula, opened a restaurant and pizzeria called Papa Leone, in Manhattan Beach. When they retired, in 2017, the place closed; their three children had chosen other careers. But when the pandemic began their son Salvatore returned to New York from Berlin, where he'd been working as a d.j., and, with time on his hands, started experimenting with pizza in his parents' back yard. One thing led to another. After ruling out Bushwick, near where he lives (he felt it was oversaturated, from a pizza perspective), he found a corner storefront in Sheepshead Bay, not far from where Papa Leone had been, and opened Lucia Pizza of Avenue X (2201 Avenue X, Brooklyn; pizzas from $18.50).

If the artistry of the pies can't quite compare to da Michele (the dough serves its purpose, but it's nothing to marvel at), Salvatore does his home town proud with a restaurant that feels rooted in history while keeping up with the times. The lush and tangy vodka sauce on the Papa Leone pie is made according to his parents' recipe. The Cudduruni, topped with marinara, Gaeta olives, and—fair warning—a truly generous smattering of very salty anchovies, harks back to their native Sicily. But why shouldn't you be able to pick up a bottle of natural wine to go with your 'roni cups—as those little bowl-shaped slices of pepperoni have come to be known—in Sheepshead Bay? Salvatore pairs 'roni cups with Mike's Hot Honey, a pizza topping that's become so ubiquitous it's verging on cliché. But a pie featuring silky cremini mushrooms, squiggles of fire-roasted-poblano crema, and aged provolone is totally his own, a creative risk that pays off and pushes ahead.

—*Hannah Goldfield*

PHOTOGRAPH BY LANNA APISUKH AND LUCIA BURICELLI FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

THE
NEW YORKER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THE NEW YORKER

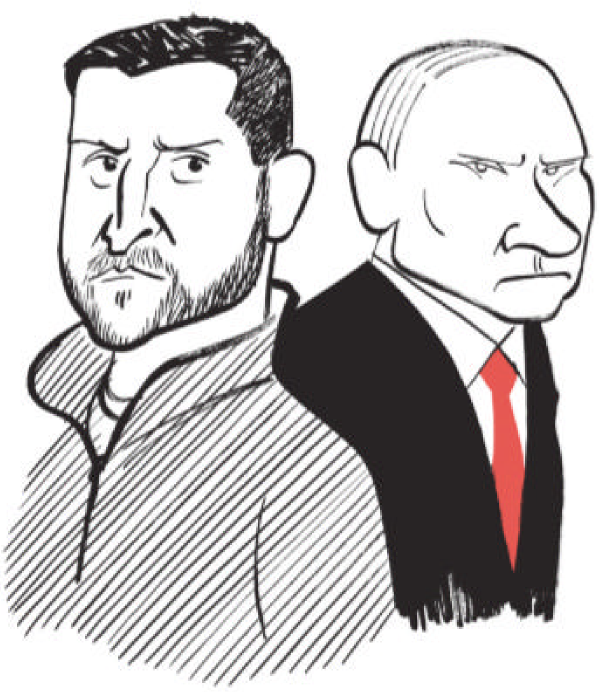
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
WARTIME LIES

On February 24, 2022, Vladimir Putin, the Russian President, ordered the invasion of Ukraine, unleashing the full force of his military on an unthreatening neighbor, and the full force of his propagandists on his own population. He had little doubt about his prospects. For years, he had been regarded in the world press as a singularly cunning strategist; at the same time, he methodically crushed civil society in his country and sidelined any dissenting voices in the Kremlin.

So who was going to stop him on the road to Kyiv? Hadn't Donald Trump, during his Presidency, exposed and deepened the fissures in the NATO alliance? Under Joe Biden, the United States seemed finished with foreign adventures—humiliated by its chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and distracted by its internal divisions. And what of Ukraine itself? It was a pseudo-nation, hopelessly corrupt and led by Volodymyr Zelensky, a former sitcom actor with an approval rating south of thirty per cent. Putin's serene presumption was that, within a week, his forces would overrun Kyiv, arrest Zelensky and his advisers, and install a cast of collaborators. Putin was counting on historians to celebrate his rightful restoration of Imperial Russia.

A year later, the ramifications of his delusions are enormous and bloody. We do not know the precise number of dead, though it is certainly more than a quarter of a million. Unmoved by the losses on his own side, much less on Ukraine's, Putin has sent his minions to the provinces to scoop up more human material for the meat grinder of his war. And what of his strategic mastery? For years, the Kremlin leadership advertised the modernization of its post-Soviet military, the sophistication of its "asymmetric" fighting doctrine. But every credible analyst of the invasion has been stunned by the scale of Putin's folly—the miserable planning and poor intelligence, the lack of training and logistics, the lawlessness of his officer corps. His strategy, it turned out, was of the most primitive and criminal variety: the deliberate targeting of civilian structures—schools, hospitals, apartment buildings, power plants, bridges. In Bucha, Kherson, Izyum, and elsewhere, Russian forces and mercenaries have carried out acts of torture, which have been well documented by journalists and human-rights organizations.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

In a year's time, what has Putin achieved? To set the stage for this full-scale invasion—it should be recalled that the first act of aggression came in 2014, when Russian soldiers took Crimea and infiltrated the Donbas—he issued a long, historically perverse manifesto that asserted what he had been telling foreign leaders for years: that there is no such thing as Ukrainian nationhood. But by invading Ukraine, and doing so with such brutality, he has unified Ukrainians in their hatred of Russia and in their resolve to create a future as a free, independent, and European nation.

Russian propagandists (much like the propagandists of the G.O.P.) refer to President Biden as a doddering hack, incapable of making it through a coherent sentence, let alone putting up an effective resistance to the Russian armed forces. Yet, in the past year, Biden has conducted a foreign policy of competence and moral clarity, skillfully balancing strength, diplomacy, and restraint. After having publicly predicted Putin's intention to invade, Biden won congressional support to send nearly thirty billion dollars in assistance to Ukraine, supplying its armed forces with crucial air-defense systems, mobile multiple-rocket launchers, and, most recently, M1 Abrams tanks. Biden has recognized and advertised the immense stakes of the conflict, but he has taken pains not to provoke a direct conflict with Russia. The Europeans have acted with similar determination. The opposition in Congress to supporting the Ukrainian cause has so far been limited mainly to the right wing of the Republican Party, with an assist from its attendant media outlets.

Putin's failure extends well beyond the battlefield. He has isolated Russia from much of the world, undermining its reputation, its economy, and its prospects. Hundreds of thousands of Russians—often the best and the brightest in tech, academia, and the arts—have left the country. With Putin's most compelling political opponent, Alexey Navalny, languishing in a prison camp, and independent media outlets shuttered, it may seem that Putin has secured the bovine indifference of all his subjects. And yet there are signs of disaffection: protests, individual acts of defiance reported on Telegram and other social media. One of the top-selling books of the past year in Russia has been George Orwell's dystopian novel "1984." Not long after the invasion, police in the city of Ivanovo arrested two people who were handing out free copies on the street. Sales are so high, and the implications so obvious, that Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson for the foreign ministry, felt compelled to reject the notion that the novel resembles Putin's rule in any way. "In school, we were drilled that Orwell was describing the horrors of totalitarianism," she said. "This is one of those global fakes." Instead, the novel "depicted how liberalism would lead humanity to a dead end."

Although the anniversary of Putin's invasion is a moment to pay solemn tribute to the dead and to celebrate the astonishing resilience of Ukraine, it cannot be one of heedless overconfidence. This is a war that could go on for a very long time. As Dara Massicot, an expert on the Russian military, writes in the latest issue of *Foreign Affairs*, "The Russian armed forces are not wholly incompetent or incapable of learning." Her article deftly anatomizes Russia's failures, but also goes into alarming depth about how the military leadership can call on hundreds of thousands of recruits, and better exploit the resources of a vast country to inflict greater pain on Ukraine. Crucially, Putin seems not to care about casualties in his ranks. Just recently, hundreds of his soldiers were, according to a leading Russian officer, killed "like turkeys at a shooting range" in the town of Vuhledar, in eastern Ukraine. Putin responded laconically to the debacle. His 155th Marine Brigade, he said, was "performing as it should."

One of the many gifts that Zelensky and the Ukrainian people have provided in the past year is the example of their valor and their sanity. In the most heroic terms, they have drawn the line against delusion. Putin told Ukraine that it is not a nation. Ukraine has given its response. As Orwell wrote in his novel, "There was truth and there was untruth, and if you clung to the truth even against the whole world, you were not mad."

—*David Remnick*

DEPT. OF MEDIATION
THE PITS

The island of Manhattan is made up of about six hundred and forty million square feet, most of them accounted for. Disputes inevitably arise. Take a recent battle between two luxury high-rises on Fifth Avenue, at Seventy-ninth Street, across from Central Park, over a dingy rectangular space, thirteen by twenty-seven feet (or so) of chipped concrete and mismatched brick—what looks, to the untrained eye, like a disused ditch. This no man's land, referred to, in a recent lawsuit, as "the Pit," is technically owned by the building to its north. Yet the building to its south, a high-end co-op, claims to have used the Pit for more than thirty years as a storage area for repair equipment: hot tar, stacks of bricks, timber, pavers. This, they say, allows them to take ownership of the plot under a legal doctrine known as "adverse possession." Like pirates who went to law school, they are demanding that the courts give them the Pit.

"This is euphoria for a real-estate attorney," Adam Leitman Bailey, the lawyer for the south-siders, said the other day. "The philosophy in America is to use your land or lose it." Adverse-possession cases typically involve small-potatoes disputes about property lines near driveways and back yards. "To have one on Fifth Avenue?" Bailey went on. "It's like, I've never done a drug before, but I imagine it's— Actually, that's a bad comparison. But it's a thrilling case."

The Pit, being a pit, does not hold a lot of obvious appeal. But the owner of the north-side property, who happens to be Eliot Spitzer, the former governor of New York, has plans to replace the current high-rise rental building with an even more luxurious condo development, operating under the assumption that he could use the entire footprint, Pit included. Losing the Pit might mean costly delays or amendments to the project plan. (The construction of a new hotel in the diamond district has been slowed for years over an eighteen-inch gap that the neighboring building claims to use for storing its antennas.)

The south-side building, which, according to StreetEasy, has a "private driveway to help you elude the paparazzi," isn't the kind of place where people should be stressing out over a pit. (Co-op owners have included members of the Sackler and Wexner families.) In a spirit of neighborliness, a call was placed to Aaron Aziz, a commercial-real-estate broker, to look for alternative pitlike spaces nearby for the plaintiffs to use. "A small space like that"—three hundred and fifty square feet—"it's not so, so available," he said. There was an option on the lower level of a building on East Eighty-seventh Street, but would the landlord be O.K. with stacking bricks there? "I mean, yeah, hypothetically, they could do anything they'd like with it," Aziz said. "But it's a hefty amount of rent"—three thousand five hundred a month—"to pay for just storage. I'd recommend they spend some time and find a storage unit."

The nearest Manhattan Mini Storage (around fourteen hundred a month), however, is more than fifteen blocks and six avenues away. The south-siders might consider an on-site solution. A three-bedroom apartment on the fifth floor is available for $5.3 million. At least some of the equipment could probably be squeezed into the unit's staff room (nine by twelve) and its in-building storage unit (eight by six). Or perhaps a compromise—somewhere walkable but suitably luxurious? Pier Luigi Loro Piana, the billionaire cashmere heir, owns an apartment on the co-op's nineteenth floor. There's a

Loro Piana store on Madison; paced off by foot not long ago, a lounge area near some second-floor dressing rooms measured twelve by nineteen feet—ample space for a few buckets of tar.

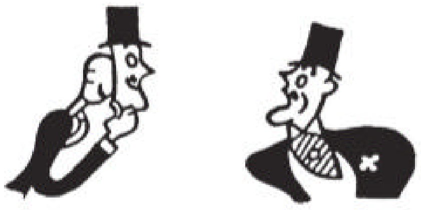
If proximity isn't an issue, Spitzer could offer to book the co-op a hotel room—No. 871 at the Mayflower, in Washington, D.C., for instance, is in the ballpark of three hundred and fifty square feet, has a personal safe, and on average goes for about two hundred and fifty bucks a night.

Another thought—could the Pit be shared? A few years ago, in Florida, a property-line dispute was resolved, in a way, when one landowner built a fence through his neighbor's back-yard pool. But the prospects look dim. "We're not sharing the Pit," Bailey said. "It's ours."

Reached by telephone, Spitzer, who has called the lawsuit "an embarrassment," was equally confident. "The law does not look kindly on cases that are brought for the purposes of harassment," he said. "We let them store a few bricks in our back yard, and it leads to this? It's the kind of thing you do for your neighbor."

—*Micah Hauser*

DEPT. OF COLLABORATION
KNUCKLEHEADS



The filmmakers, comedians, and musicians Whitmer Thomas (platinum-blond mop, hopeful smile) and Clay Tatum (thick-framed glasses, downbeat vibe) have been best friends since the sixth grade. Growing up in the early two-thousands in Gulf Shores, Alabama, they bonded over skateboarding, comedy, and punk rock. But living in a small town had its disadvantages. "We were never able to go full *scene*, because we didn't have the right gear," Thomas said the other day, from behind the wheel of a rented Honda Pilot S.U.V. "We could only get, like, Rustler jeans at Walmart."

"We didn't have skinny plaid pants," Tatum clarified.

The friends had arrived in town the night before from Los Angeles, where they live, to begin an East Coast tour of small clubs, with Thomas, who is thirty-four, singing and Tatum, thirty-five, playing guitar. (They perform their tragicomic pop rock under Thomas's name, although "sometimes we call ourselves Clay Tatum and the Whitmer Thomases," Thomas said.) It was raining, and the car was inching its way toward New Jersey, to pick up tour merch from a screen-printing shop. "This is literally my dream," Tatum said, peering out the window. "As a kid, I wanted to be walking in New York in a fucking blazer, talking to my friends. I always wanted to seem smarter than I really was."

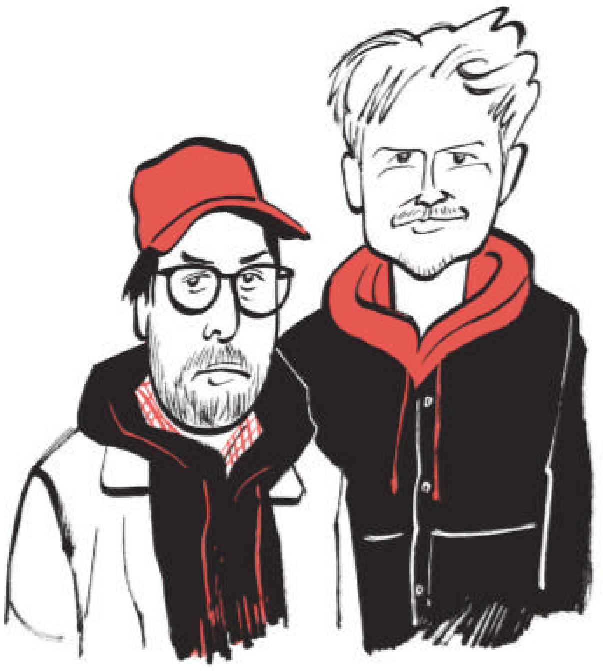
"The Golden One," Thomas's 2020 HBO standup special, which combined music and comedy, was edited and co-directed by Tatum. Centering on the death of Thomas's mother, a bar-band singer who'd struggled with alcoholism, it was released just before COVID hit. "At the première, fancy people were telling us, 'When this comes out, your life will change,'" Thomas said. "And then the special was, like, completely forgotten." He veered onto the Garden State Parkway as Tatum fiddled with the defogger.

The pause that the pandemic provided allowed Thomas and Tatum to act in "The Civil Dead," a film that they co-wrote and that Tatum directed, which was just released. In the movie, shot for thirty thousand dollars, Thomas plays a clingy ghost invisible to everyone but Tatum, leading to high jinks as existential and cringey as they are funny. As in real life, Thomas's character is more emotional, and Tatum's is ironically detached.

"We knew exactly what we wanted to do, but it took us fifteen years," Tatum said, of making a movie. Influenced by "Jackass" and by Blink-182's pop-punk shenanigans, the pair had got familiar with camerawork by shooting skate videos and comedy sketches in high school. After graduation, Thomas moved to L.A., with dreams of acting, and Tatum enrolled in the Savannah College of Art and Design. Jealous of Thomas, Tatum soon headed west: "When you're in the middle of Georgia and your friend is, like—"

"One time, I saw Conan at Tower Records," Thomas broke in, deadpan. He took the Paterson exit.

Tatum moved in to Thomas's Santa Monica studio. "We'd go to Hollywood Boulevard and walk around. We didn't know you were supposed to go to Echo Park or nothing like that," Thomas said. "We lived in a place where everybody wore a deep V-neck and a fedora." For four years, Thomas and Tatum delivered pizzas. Wanting to be taken seriously as an actor, Thomas moved away from sketch comedy ("I didn't tell a single joke the first year I lived in L.A.," he said. "I wanted to be smoldering"); Tatum tried making dramatic shorts, but found it so embarrassing that he deleted them all. Things began to click when, with money Thomas inherited from his mother, they rented a black-box theatre and began doing a weekly comedy night with a couple of friends, called "Power Violence," which they continued to run until 2018. They started to find their voice.



Clay Tatum and Whitmer Thomas

"Comedy saved our asses," Tatum said.

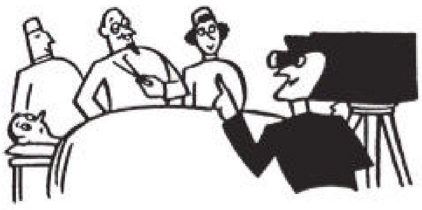
"Without it I'd be just some pathetic bleeding whatever, and Clay would be even more pretentious," Thomas said. "At the end of the day, we're dumb. Hopefully we remind people of their cousin, or something."

This goofy spirit animates "The Civil Dead." "It's about two knuckleheads walking around, talking," Thomas said.

"Which is all we care about," Tatum added. After pulling into a parking spot near the printing house, Thomas wandered off. "Whit has this vibe where easy things don't come that easy for him," Tatum said, as he watched his friend amble from one side of the building to the other, unable to find a door. "Like, he'll drive a car and the bumper will all of a sudden fall off, and I'm, like—" he laughed. " 'Why does this sort of thing happen to you all the time?' "

—*Naomi Fry*

THE MUSICAL LIFE
DOUBLE AWAKENING



"It's like a fairy tale, the whole thing," the composer Tobias Picker said the other day, standing in a Boston rehearsal studio. He was presiding over a run-through of an opera that he adapted from "Awakenings," the 1973 book by his late friend the neurologist Oliver Sacks. The story, about a group of patients immobilized by encephalitis lethargica in a Bronx hospital in the sixties, had already inspired a Harold Pinter play and an Oscar-nominated film. The opera's East Coast première is this week, at the Huntington Theatre.

Picker, sixty-eight, has a Roman nose and salt-and-pepper curls, and he made notes on his score as the cast rehearsed a prologue set in a hospital dayroom. Three of the warehoused patients were being maneuvered in wheelchairs, singing softly, clutching at thin lap blankets, and occasionally convulsing. Twenty chorus members surrounded them, recounting the story of Sleeping Beauty in a sombre lilt: "Our days fade into weeks and years./Your time is not like time to us./We all cry unseen tears."

"Sleeping Beauty was actually a very tragic story," Picker said. "We based this on the Grimms' version, which was much darker than in Disney." When the piano stopped, a mezzo-soprano singing the part of a patient named Miriam reminded the cast to lock the wheelchairs. "Don't let me roll," she said.

Picker met Sacks at a dinner party in the early nineties, having engineered an introduction so that he could get the doctor's opinion on his own tics. He has had Tourette's syndrome since childhood, although it wasn't diagnosed until he was in his thirties. Nervous before Sacks's arrival that night, Picker took some Valium, which blunted his symptoms. He was dismayed to learn from a friend that, in the elevator after the dinner, Sacks dismissed him as a "negligible case."

"I felt very hurt, because Oliver was really only interested in *interesting* cases," Picker said. Sacks wasn't persuaded until years later, when Picker showed him a video reel, but by then the men had become mutual muses. In his book "Musicophilia," Sacks described the curious disappearance of Picker's tics when he worked on music: "I have watched him as he sits almost motionless for hours, orchestrating one of his études." Picker credits Sacks with helping him relieve his long-held shame. "I learned to survive with his help," Picker said at the rehearsal.

In the opera, Sacks is depicted as a kind of fairy-tale prince, restoring his catatonic patients to their previous states, if only temporarily, with the help of a "miracle drug" called L-dopa. Picker and his librettist—the novelist and neuroradiologist Aryeh Lev Stollman, who is also his husband—worked into the story a parallel awakening for the doctor himself. Sacks didn't come out publicly until a few months before his death, in 2015, in his last book, the memoir "On the Move: A Life." Portraying Sacks as a gay man was important to Picker. "I had written five operas about heterosexuals," he said, before pausing to correct himself: "Fantastic Mr. Fox," an opera in three acts that Picker adapted from Roald Dahl's book, included a lesbian love story about two pieces of farm equipment. "Agnes the Digger and Mavis the Tractor fall in love," he said.

"Awakenings" doesn't allow Sacks such a happy ending. After a tender, private encounter with a male nurse, he withdraws to the closet. "I am no longer the man I was," Sacks sings at the end, "but I have not truly awakened yet." His patients, too, revert to their immobile states after the brief success of L-dopa. In Act II, one patient shrieks, "That L-dopa, it's Hell-dopa!"

At the rehearsal, Picker and his director, James Robinson, had the group run a scene in which Sacks persuades his surly superior, Dr. Podsnap, to use L-dopa on a test patient. Members of the chorus rolled a blackboard scrawled with the words "MORBIDITY & MORTALITY" onstage. The Sacks character strode in carrying a motorcycle helmet.

Oliver Sacks

"Podsnap is gonna give him a little attitude back, so play that up," Robinson told the singer. "Sacks is not one of the *guys*." He urged him to summon his inner "motorcycle daddy."

"When he was living in California, in the early sixties, he was definitely a muscle-beach motorcycle daddy, as grandma used to say," Robinson added. "He wrote about his sexual exploits—but then there was a period when he was completely celibate."

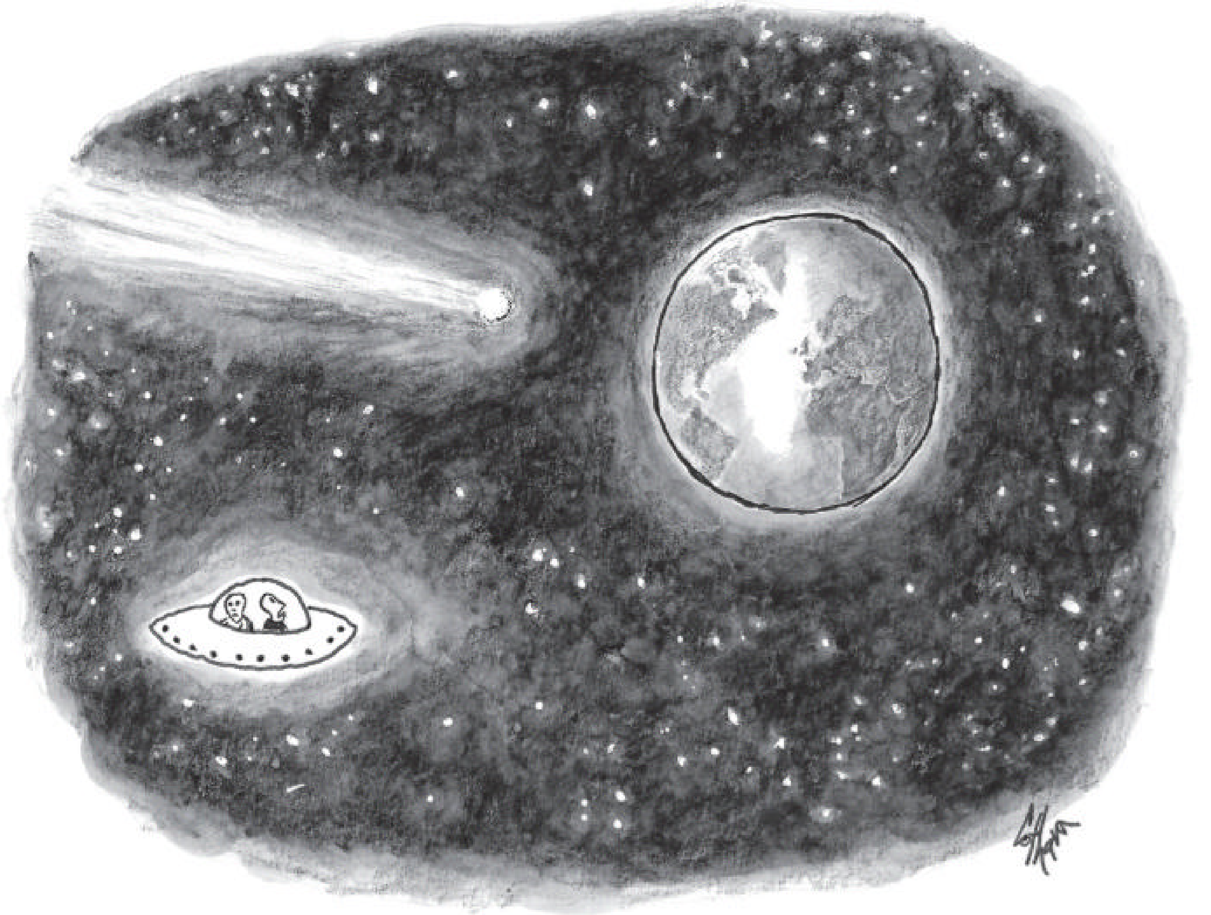
"He claimed thirty-five years," Picker said. "But he did tend to exaggerate."

On an iPhone, Picker pulled up an image of the young Sacks from the cover of his final book, looking hunky astride his motorcycle. Picker had first seen the photo ten years ago, at Sacks's apartment, in Sheridan Square, during a photo shoot for a ballet version of "Awakenings" that Picker wrote before the opera. "I was, like, 'Oliver, that's you? You were *really* hot,' " he recalled. Sacks sighed, replying, "If only I had known."

—*Eren Orbey*

DEPT. OF S.O.S.
PSYCHEDELICS FOR UKRAINE

Late last month, the Biden Administration announced that the U.S. would send thirty-one M1 Abrams tanks to Ukraine. Meanwhile, in New York, a Ukrainian delegation, including a representative of the Territorial Defense Forces, had gathered to consider other types of aid. The goal, according to an ad for the event, was to promote "the psychological and spiritual resilience of Ukrainian people living in trauma, crisis, and war." One possible avenue for healing? Psychedelics.



"They've been asking for this for a long time."

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The delegation met at a studio in Chelsea run by a Polish artist named Agnieszka Pilat. She paints with the aid of mobile robots on loan from Boston Dynamics; a yellow robot that resembled a dog pattered around the space as the audience arrived. One of the panelists, Dr. Laura Vandenberg, a former Peace Corps volunteer in Ukraine, chatted with her friend Leah Drew, a healer and "mind-set mentor" based in Colorado, who specializes in trauma. "For Ukraine, it's no longer about body armor," Vandenberg said. "It's about thriving."

"We have this idea that war is super depressing, super ugly," Drew, who wore a bright-magenta jumpsuit, said. "But it can be empowering. There's positivity in trauma. They're trying to be present."

Vandenberg responded, "I'm seeing women who've made the developmental leap from defensive and worried to beautiful and brave. What they need now is to be able to survive with trauma."

She gestured to the Reverend Serhiy Dmytriyev, a chaplain for the Ukrainian Territorial Defense Forces, who had just walked in, wearing his uniform. "He's bringing his spiritual practices to defenders," she said. "He wears an earring to indicate that he's the last living man of his family. Before lining up to go into battle, the men with the earrings are traditionally in the back."

The panelists took their seats in a row of office chairs. Dmytriyev kicked things off by telling the group, through a translator, that he hopes to train fifteen hundred military chaplains in a special spiritual-resilience program.

A man visiting from Ukraine asked the panel, "How can I help the guys I know who have lost friends?"

An audience member named Jonathan Dickinson, a partner at a psychedelic holistic healing company called Ambio, asked, "How are people finding resilience and hope right now?" He talked about how, for the past two years, his company has been providing U.S. Special Forces with ibogaine, a dissociative psychedelic derived from an African shrub. "As they transition to civilian life, it's about being able to feel present, relaxed, not as reactive," he said. "Combat experience requires a flow state. The drug takes you into a nourishing, decomposing state, reconnecting with the deep spiritual foundation people are trying to recover." He added that Ambio is running a treatment center in Tijuana, where the drug, which carries cardiac risks, is administered as a "medically supported experience" to patients who pay sixty-five hundred dollars.

Groups in Ukraine are "pushing for legalization of psychedelics for medical use," Drew said.

Pilat, who wore a velvet blazer and yellow pants, powered off the robot dog, which was whirring. She said, "Growing up behind the Iron Curtain, when I looked at American industry, I thought, The aristocracy there is the machine—they don't have a real aristocracy, just tech moguls. That's where the power is." Her collectors in the Bay Area, she said, "are some of the biggest V.C.s, and they're all putting money behind psychedelics." She talked about the "fatigue with the war" that had set in around the world. Talk of psychedelic treatments, she hoped, "might make it a 'sexy' conversation again."

A psychedelic solution has already been under discussion in Ukraine. After the panel convened, Yuriy Blokhin, who moved from Kyiv to Canada and who runs the North American branch of the Ukrainian Psychedelic Research Association, was reached by phone. "Ayahuasca saved my life after an episode of depression," he said. "Then I met an Army Ranger, and we started using it to help special-ops veterans. We want to make sure that when the war in Ukraine ends there are world-class options. And it can become an additional stream of revenue for Ukraine." He added that there was "a critical mass of open-mindedness in Ukraine" and mentioned "the government's dynamic startup culture." Blokhin wants to train therapists who will treat Ukrainian refugees in the use of psychedelics. "It's not a good idea to use psychedelics in-country during the war," he said. "Setting is really important, and you want a safe space."

—*Antonia Hitchens*

PROFILES

LATE SHIFT

After a career made from amiable roles, Randall Park breaks out of character.

BY HUA HSU

"Shortcomings," directed by Park, is full of, in his word, "shitty" people.

I don't remember when I first saw Randall Park, only that one day he seemed to be everywhere.

Park, a forty-eight-year-old Korean American actor, has been on television and in film for nearly two decades, becoming one of those faces you recognize instantly—but from what? For years, he had cameos and guest spots, playing a doctor, a friend of a friend, another doctor. He's been on "The Office," "Curb Your Enthusiasm," and "Veep," and he is one of the few actors currently working in both the Marvel and the D.C. cinematic universes.

His career has been defined by a kind of chummy adaptability, whether he plays a dictator (he made Kim Jong Un seem like a fun hang in "The Interview," from 2014) or raps, as he did as a slacker in the 2019 romantic comedy "Always Be My Maybe," or adopts an immigrant's accent, as in his breakthrough role, on the ABC sitcom "Fresh Off the Boat," adapted from the chef Eddie Huang's memoir. The series débuted in 2015 and was the first network show in nearly two decades to feature a predominantly Asian cast. For six seasons, Park played Louis Huang, the series' wholesome, occasionally overwhelmed father. His onscreen presence makes him seem approachable, if people notice him at all. "One of the great advantages of being Asian, and borderline well known, is that people tend to think you look like just another Asian," he told me. I made this mistake myself one time. We met near Manhattan's Chinatown and, as he approached, I noticed his colorful cycling hat before I noticed him.

Park is the kind of actor who succeeds by reacting to other people's drama rather than being at the center of his own. Onscreen, as well as in person, he is deferential and gracious, quick to fill in conversation with agreement and encouragement, happy to shift the focus away from himself. "I don't consider myself a social person," Park told me. "But acting forces me to be social. And, while I'm social, I'm, like, This is so fun. I'm so glad something's forcing me to be social and to meet these people and talk to these people. Because if I was on my own I would never do that."

In 2019, Park started Imminent Collision, a production company, with Michael Golamco and Hieu Ho, two friends he met through a theatre troupe he started in college. "He's always been a really ambitious guy," the comedian Ali Wong, his longtime friend and "Always Be My Maybe" co-star, told me. "But it's never been gross."

Park was in New York, with Ho, to film his directorial début, "Shortcomings," an adaptation of Adrian Tomine's 2007 graphic novel about a group of young, somewhat unlikable Asian Americans negotiating relationships, late-twenties ambition, and their baser instincts. The film is set in the present, giving its central questions about race, self-loathing, and voyeurism a fresh backdrop: cancel culture, Instagram stalking, the question of whether "Crazy Rich Asians"-style blockbusters are actually good for the Asian American community—if you believe that such a thing exists.

"Shortcomings" is a movie full of, in Park's word, "shitty" characters, and he has dreamed of making it for more than fifteen years. It's an unlikely passion project for someone known for playing amiable roles. "You know how it is. It's like they kind of know you for one thing, so that's all the offers you're getting," he told me. "That's where 'Shortcomings' comes in. I think people will be surprised. I anticipate when it comes into the real world it'll be—I don't know if

PHOTOGRAPH BY WILLEM VERBEECK

'divisive' is the word. I think that there will be people who are uncomfortable with it."

Last fall, Park and I were driving through West Los Angeles in a weathered Toyota RAV4. A faded photo of his daughter was tucked into his visor. He proudly showed off one of his rare indulgences: a new receiver he had installed so that he could play music from his phone. "It's crazy," he said, chuckling. "I always wanted it."

We pulled up in front of Hamilton High School, his alma mater, and he recalled the Los Angeles riots in 1992, when students were told to go home early, and he wandered the streets all day with a friend. "I wasn't cool, but I was cool with everyone," he told me. In high school, Park and his group of friends, which he describes as racially mixed, like a "perfect Benetton ad," spent their free time filming their own skits, in the style of "In Living Color."

Park has spent his entire life in Los Angeles, the second son of Korean immigrants. His father worked at a stuffed-toy company before opening a one-hour-photo studio in Santa Monica. For thirty years, his mother worked in the accounting office at the U.C.L.A. student store. His parents still live in the modest house in the Castle Heights neighborhood where he and his brother were brought up.

In the early nineteen-nineties, he attended U.C.L.A., a transformative experience. He had not grown up around many Asian Americans, and, at first, he was overwhelmed. Then, he said, "after a while, it was, like, Oh, my gosh, I love this. This is incredible. A community." An introductory course in Asian American studies opened his eyes to the history, the contours, and the contradictions of this community.

An instructor encouraged Park to pursue creative writing. He and his friends decided to write plays and stage them. They founded an Asian American troupe, whose first performance was "The Treehouse Bachelor Society," a play that Park had written about U.C.L.A. undergraduates, not unlike himself and his friends, trying to figure out relationships, ambition, and self-acceptance.

The opening night drew a sellout crowd of hundreds of people. "We were so cocky, because we were so popular," Park said. "I remember, during that, hoping that this was gonna be like a Steppenwolf type of thing. One day we'll look back and see all these people who came from that theatre company."

Park stayed at U.C.L.A., where he started a master's degree in Asian American studies, researching depictions of Korean merchants in African American film. Then he got a job as a graphic designer at a Los Angeles alternative weekly. He directed shows in the back yard of his parents' house, where he was living; he taught himself stage makeup and amassed a collection of wigs and costumes. He did standup comedy and rapped in a band modelled after the Roots.

Around 2002, Park quit his full-time job and began to audition, mostly for commercials but occasionally for sitcoms. He booked just enough roles to feel O.K. about his long-term prospects, but not enough that he could leave home permanently. Even when he got his first steady gig, in 2006, as a cast member on the MTV improv-and-skit show "Wild 'N Out," he didn't give up his shifts at Starbucks. At U.C.L.A., his mother worked alongside young people who wanted to break into Hollywood. "They would show up to work with their head shots and reels and they'd show my mom," Park said. "I know in her head it was, like, If they can't make it, how on earth are you gonna make it?"

Park was in his late twenties when he started auditioning, and as he entered his thirties he regarded the small, competitive cohort of Asian American actors and wondered whether he fit in. He watched from afar as the director Justin Lin's "Better Luck Tomorrow" premièred at Sundance, in 2002, becoming the first Asian American film ever to be acquired at the festival. By 2004, such actors as Daniel Dae Kim, a regular on the ABC series "Lost," and John Cho, a star in the "Harold and Kumar" films, had broken through. Park was both heartened by their success and disheartened that opportunity seemed to be passing him by.

Around that time, Park auditioned for a guest spot on "Help Me Help You," a short-lived sitcom starring Ted Danson as a therapist. His agent told him that the part was down to him and a friend from the Asian American theatre community. He spent the weekend waiting by the phone. His friend, he said, "wasn't only a great actor, he was also super comfortable around people. And I was comfortable around *my* people, but I wasn't comfortable around the world outside, you know? It always was a marvel to me when I'd see somebody who knew how to, like, be a human."

Park told me this story a couple of times, always with a mix of seriousness and self-effacing humor. "My entire future rested on this one-day guest-star role," he said. He realized that this seemed like a minor indignity in an actor's career. "I just needed some confirmation that I was doing the right thing with my life." When his agent gave him the bad news, Park began crying. "It was the lowest I had ever felt," he said.

He contemplated quitting and going for a master's in architecture, but he hadn't taken the prerequisite courses. So he kept auditioning. He recalls writing in his journal that his only goal was to book enough commercial work to be able to move out of his parents' house, so that he could have his own back yard in which to stage plays.

Around this time, Park wandered into Giant Robot, a store specializing in Asian and Asian American pop culture. He gravitated toward the cover of "Shortcomings," Tomine's graphic novel: he had never seen Asian characters drawn in such a realistic, cliché-free style. And he had never read anything about young Asian Americans, like him, bumming around, hanging out in cafés, struggling with change, ambition, insecurity, and their own ugliness. He read the entire book in the store and then bought it so that he could read it again at home.

He saw himself in all the characters: some were politically righteous and romantic, others apathetic, judgmental, and cruel. In his experience, Asian American actors rarely got the chance to explore such a full range of emotions; they were often cast according to stereotype, as doctors or scientists, never as everyday antiheroes just trying to figure life out. He was struck: "Oh, my God, there were stories like this out in the world."

Park dreamed of playing a character as complex as Tomine's protagonist, a snobby, possibly self-loathing Japanese American film buff named Ben. But, as he slowly began booking gigs and piecing together a career, he aged out of the role.

In 2009, he married Jae Suh Park, an actress he had met at a theatre fundraiser, and in 2012 they had a daughter, Ruby. The family starred in a 2013 Web comedy series that Park created, called "Baby Mentalist," about a crime-fighting baby.

There are times when it's hard to tell whether Park is smiling or grimacing, particularly when he reflects on the first decade of his career, which he recalls as an "extended low." Making those low-budget Web series with friends, like "Baby Mentalist" and "IKEA Heights," a soap-opera spoof that was surreptitiously filmed in an IKEA in Burbank, gave Park a creative outlet. But he was constantly fearful that work would dry up at any moment. In traffic just outside Hollywood, I asked how different his life might be if success had come earlier.

"I wouldn't be as appreciative of things," he said. He chuckled. "I definitely wouldn't be driving a RAV4."

He told me about a pilot he once shot, in which he played a police officer. As Park delivered his first line, the director cut him short. He told Park to be stronger. "I was just so eager to please," Park said. "I was, like, *Absolutely*. I didn't fully know what he meant, I was just, like, *Yes, yes*." He tried another reading, but the director stopped him again: "Can you just play it more manly?" This happened several more times, until the director finally yelled at Park to "be more of a man!"

"I'm just shaking inside and trembling," he told me. He ate lunch by himself, and spent the rest of the shoot too ashamed to speak to his fellow-actors.

I told him that this struck me as a far more wrenching story than the one about the Danson audition. But he said that, by the time he filmed the pilot, he had received enough rejections to understand that acting was not a "healthy life."

He was forty when "Fresh Off the Boat" débuted. It was a career-making opportunity, and, significantly, it allowed him to spend time at home with his family. "I can see how playing the dad on a network sitcom is not the coolest thing in the world," he said, his face creasing with a hint of weariness. "But I found success so much later, any regular job is *incredible* to me."

Yet he felt some reluctance, including a bout of severe anxiety just before filming began. His character was Taiwanese American, and he was unsure whether it was right for a Korean American to do a Taiwanese immigrant's accent. "There was a lot of pressure on that show to be the answer for, like, Asian America," he said. "Having studied all that stuff and been a part of that community, I was a part of that pressure." After filming the pilot, he asked to meet with Huang, whose memoir inspired the series, bringing him a special-edition bottle of Jack Daniel's as a gift. Huang was already souring on ABC's vision for the series, a creative schism that later led to his disavowing it. But he appreciated that the show represented something important. "I told Randall, Do you want to be part of making history and do something special that will open the door for other people?" Huang said to me. "Or do you want to stare at neuroses?"

When Huang was initially trying to sell the show, "the only Asian American dude on anything was Randall in 'Veep.' We are going to ride this Randall horse to the promised land. There was no other choice. He was Korean, he was uncomfortable . . . but I was, like, Clip up, dog, we ridin' you. Randall did his thing, man."

"Fresh Off the Boat" got good ratings and helped launch the careers of the actress Constance Wu and the comedian Ali Wong, a writer on the show, and a member of the theatre company that Park had founded in the nineties. The show aired for six seasons—a significant achievement. But its success was quickly overshadowed by a succession of even bigger milestones. In 2018, "Crazy Rich Asians" became one of the highest-grossing romantic comedies of all time, turning Wu into a movie star. There were soon new peaks: the Chinese American filmmaker Lulu Wang's 2019 indie hit, "The Farewell," a Golden Globe winner about a woman travelling to China for a final visit with her terminally ill grandmother; "Minari," from 2020, the Korean American filmmaker Lee Isaac Chung's austere Academy Award-winning story of a Korean American family in rural Arkansas in the nineteen-eighties; and "Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings," from 2021, Marvel's first movie to feature an Asian American superhero. This year, no film has garnered more Academy Award nominations than "Everything Everywhere All at Once," a story of immigrant dislocation and family dysfunction filtered through the giddy psychedelia of the directors Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert. Park was friends with many of the people behind these projects. But he was never invited to audition for any of them. "It could be because I was unavailable, or it could be that they just didn't see me in those roles," he said.

Still, the stability of "Fresh Off the Boat" gave Park the chance to make more deliberate choices about his work. He approached Tomine about adapting "Shortcomings," though he was self-conscious about meeting the author, worried that Tomine wouldn't find him "cool" enough for the job. "Ben"—the book's arrogant protagonist—"would hate me," Park told me, and he assumed that Tomine would, too. "The last person he'd want to hear from is the dad from 'Fresh Off the Boat,'" he said. "I thought Adrian was Ben, and I thought Louis was too corny for Ben."

Tomine, a contributor to this magazine, began self-publishing a mini comic series, "Optic Nerve," as a teenager in Sacramento in the early nineties. The stories offered readers impressions of his life as a shy, bookish, artsy, deeply opinionated youth.

Tomine, who is a fourth-generation Japanese American, continued to publish "Optic Nerve" while an undergraduate at U.C. Berkeley. His style was austere and tense. He drew faces caught between insecurity and angst. As more people discovered "Optic Nerve," they noticed that his comics rarely featured Asian protagonists. "I was getting an increasing amount of, not criticism, but just inquiries from Asian American readers," he told me. "'Why aren't you representing Asian American characters?' The darker side of it is that some people thought I was trying to disguise my background and whitewash the stories I wanted to tell for the sake of a broader audience.

"I was young and defiant and rebellious and kind of snotty. And so my first reaction was, If that's what you want, then I'm definitely not gonna do it at all."

"No one will ask me for help if I look like I'm about to leave."

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But, in the early two-thousands, Tomine came up with the characters of Ben, an arrogant, insecure Japanese American film buff largely afraid of change, and Alice, his best friend, an acerbic, womanizing Korean American graduate student unafraid to tell it like it is—except to her conservative family. "The characters were a way to have a conversation with myself, to have a devil's advocate or someone who's gonna call you out on your bullshit," Tomine said.

"Shortcomings" opens with a young Asian American woman pondering her stoic grandfather, the proprietor of a fortune-cookie factory: "For most of my life I had felt distant from my grandfather, perhaps mistaking the language barrier for coldness." Eventually, she realizes that he is not unlike the cookies he sells, "a hard, protective shell" full of wisdom.

Readers may have been surprised to see Tomine turn toward such a maudlin vision of representation, after avoiding it for so long. The next pages, however, reveal that this is a scene from a low-budget independent film screening at something called "Asian-American Digi-Fest." As the audience applauds, we meet Ben, who squirms uncomfortably in his seat. He spends the drive home lecturing his girlfriend, Miko, who helped organize the festival. "Why does everything have to be some big 'statement' about race?" he asks. "Don't any of these people just want to make a movie that's good?" He refuses to grade the film on the curve of representational politics.

Ben has a complicated relationship with whiteness. He and Miko argue about why his sexual fantasies involve only white actresses. At the same time, he expresses disgust toward Asian women who date white men. He is a caricature of a certain kind of insecure Asian male, claiming that he is above race and has no need for community, yet clinging to the emasculating effects of racial victimhood to explain his toxic behavior.

"Shortcomings" was a crossover hit, earning comparisons to Philip Roth. Some read Ben's crankiness as a brazen critique of identity politics. It was rare for someone to poke fun at the earnestness of identity-driven art and the presumption that such efforts were beyond criticism. Other readers, though, saw Tomine's protagonist not as a truth-teller but as an archetype of self-loathing. Tomine recalls one uncomfortable appearance at a bookstore, where an audience member asked him about his own relationship status. "This is a work of fiction," Tomine replied. As the person sat down, he said, loudly, "I'll bet his wife is white."

On a warm afternoon in July, Park was standing on a quiet street in Manhattan, just north of Union Square. He was directing a scene in which Ben (Justin Min) and Alice (Sherry Cola) surprise Ben's girlfriend at work. Park was dressed in various shades of khaki—shorts, tan Hoka sneakers, a fitted baseball cap. He wore a colorful bracelet that his wife had made him with their daughter's name on it. Around his waist was a fanny pack holding his phone and a cigar he was saving for the last day of the shoot.

Tomine stood behind Park, who looked at a monitor to see how the shot would be framed. Tomine was so accustomed to working in solitude, he told me, that he found the various moving parts of a film set exhilarating. He'd written a screenplay of "Shortcomings" soon after the book's initial success, only to be told that it wasn't "castable." In the years since, he had updated the setting and the dialogue.

Hieu Ho, one of Park's producing partners and his friend from college, recalled being slightly confused by Park's initial attraction to the graphic novel's characters. But he realized that it was "less about relating to these characters and more like knowing these characters."

"You would not want to relate to these characters," Park added with a chuckle. "They were bad. But they were also, like, trying, you know? And it was something that you never got to see Asian Americans do in that way." It wasn't just that Park had never had the chance to play a "bad" character like Ben; I wondered if he'd ever truly related to his own happy-go-lucky roles.

Initially, Park feared that Justin Min, a thirty-two-year-old Korean American actor known for his work on the series "Umbrella Academy" and the 2021 film "After Yang," was "too pretty" to play Ben. But he recognized that Min could communicate the underlying sadness of the role. "I saw myself in him," Min said, from his house, in Los Angeles. "I told Randall at one of our first meetings, I am Ben." He paused, clarifying that he'd evolved past some of these tendencies. "Everything about him reminded me so much of my former self, five, six years ago. His cynicism, his critical eye about everything, his unconscious pretentiousness about things."

Min recalled having lunch with Park and Cola. Park told them the story of the pilot where the director had kept humiliating him. Min and Cola couldn’t stop talking about it afterward. “I’ve never had to deal with that, because by the time I came up in the industry things were starting to change,” Min told me. Not only has Min been offered a wider range of roles than Asian American actors of previous generations, he’s also worked on major projects with directors who, like him, are Asian American. Yet even this new wave of opportunity is not without its complications. Min thought that there was a feeling of overcompensation, as if, after decades of regrettable depictions of Asians, the scales were tipping too heavily in the other direction: “A lot of the roles are these men who are perfect, chiselled, morally upright, righteous. It’s almost as if the subversion of the stereotype continues to uphold the stereotype.”

Min and Cola did a few quick takes, experimenting with ways for Min’s character to express his frustration that his girlfriend was not where she claimed she would be. Some tourists did a double take when Min punctuated the last take by loudly shouting, “*Fuck!*” Park was happy with Min’s ad-libs and dismissed his leads for the day, and Min and Cola wandered back to their trailers, arms linked, as though they were actual best friends.

In the early evening, the crew moved a few blocks, to the vestibule of an apartment building near Madison Square Park, which they were using for the film’s opening scene. The contemporary version of Ben wouldn’t hate some innocuous indie—he would hate “Crazy Rich Asians.” Ben and Miko are still at a small film festival. But they are watching a glossy, big-budget rom-com, starring Asian Americans, that bears an unmistakable resemblance to the 2018 movie. A major studio has sent it to the festival to build buzz within the community.

When Tomine saw the reception of “Crazy Rich Asians,” he was curious if Hollywood would now want more “I.P. that has Asian people in it,” allowing an adaptation of “Shortcomings” to finally get made. But he also wondered if the scale of the movie’s success might crowd out more nuanced stories. “I missed my chance to do something personal and small and offbeat, and now it’s the era of blockbusters,” he recalled worrying. This wasn’t an uncommon response. “There was a part of me that really appreciated ‘Crazy Rich Asians,’ ” Min said. He was in the early stages of his career, and friends assumed that he would be able to swim in its wake. “But it was for a very specific kind of audience. I had conflicted feelings. But it was not something I could speak easily and openly about, because we were living in a time of narrative scarcity. We really had to just be on board.”

The movie-in-a-movie that opens “Shortcomings” allows the film’s characters to debate this issue. The lobby after the screening is humming with excitement. “It’s ours!” one of the festival organizers says. “That’s us, baby!” Later that night, Ben dismisses the movie as “a garish mainstream rom-com that glorifies the capitalistic fantasy of vindication through wealth and materialism.”

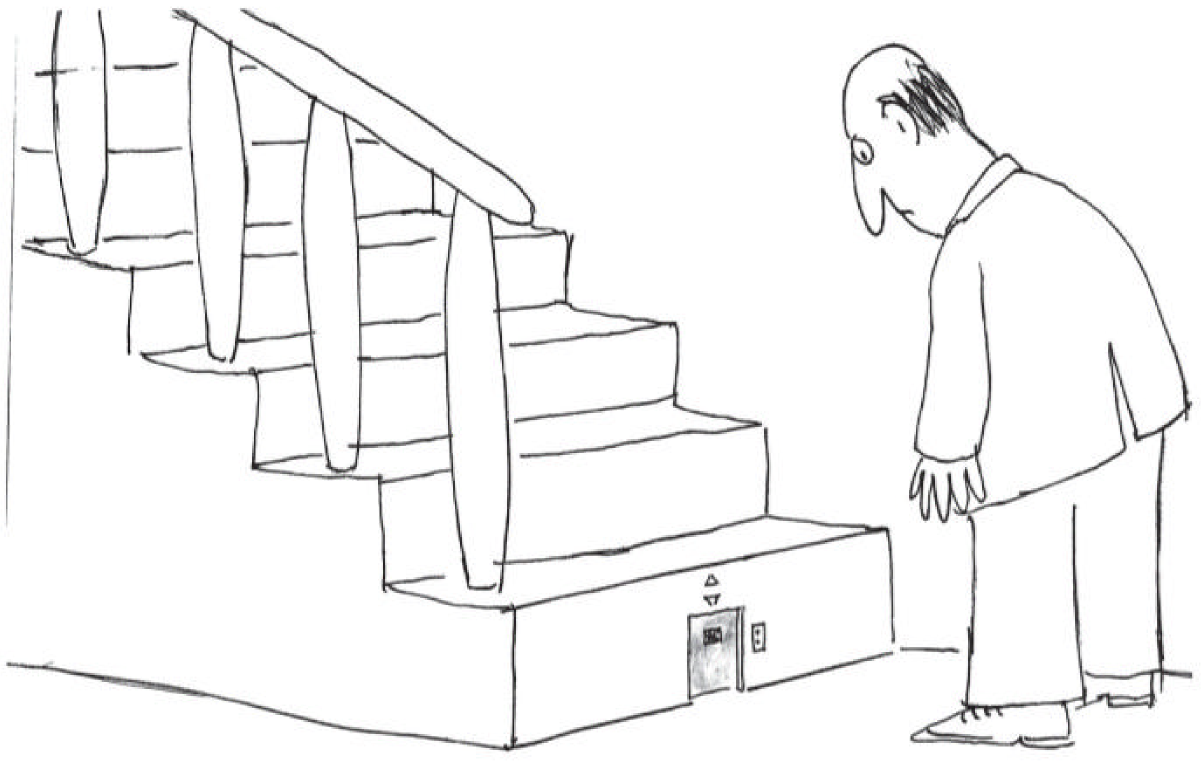
Inside the Manhattan apartment building, designers applied wallpaper to the mirrored interior of an elevator, giving it a lavish feel. Park had persuaded Ronny Chieng, an actor and comedian best known for his work on “The Daily Show,” and Stephanie Hsu, one of the Oscar-nominated leads of “Everything Everywhere All at Once,” to star in the “Crazy Rich Asians” sendup.

The shoot began late at night. Chieng was in a tuxedo, holding a glass of Scotch and a newspaper as props. Hsu carefully shuffled through the lobby in a radiant gold dress. The scene echoes the opening of “Crazy Rich Asians,” as a snooty concierge at a luxury apartment tower rejects Hsu’s application, not realizing that she and her husband are wealthy enough to buy the entire building. Tomine watched the monitor, mouthing along with the dialogue, delighted after each take.

During a break to reset the camera, Hsu and Chieng sat on a bench and chatted. I asked them if it was strange to spoof “Crazy Rich Asians”—especially since Chieng made his feature début in the film, playing a loudmouthed banker. “There’s people in the Asian community who didn’t like that movie. For me, it’s almost, like, showing why those people are being unreasonable,” Chieng said excitedly. “That’s why I agreed to do this. Not because I wanted to defend my movie.” He paused and laughed. “ ‘My’ movie. The movie I had a small role in. I just feel like there’s a thing of, when there’s not enough representation, every single project has so much pressure to be everything for everyone. It’s very easy to complain about things, especially when you’re not making anything. That’s one of the themes” in “Shortcomings.” “It’s easy to be critical when you don’t have to make anything. It’s a lot harder to actually make stuff.”

“I feel like I see it less as a spoof and more like—a nod,” Hsu added.

“That movie is actually satirical,”



Chieng said, of "Crazy Rich Asians." "In my opinion, the correct reading of that movie is it's a satirical movie." He went on, "Here, we're satirizing the satire, which is very 'Inception'-like, but, if you zoom out, the main character of this movie doesn't get that. All he sees is his own hate and insecurity. For me, I want to shit on these guys." He laughed.

Hsu said that she thought "Shortcomings" was part of a wave of more "nuanced" films and conversations only possible after the successes of "Fresh Off the Boat" and "Crazy Rich Asians."

Chieng agreed. "When something goes well, it helps everything else go well," he said. "So that's an argument in favor of a major blockbuster movie." Park came over to check in on the actors. "In the hands of a lesser director or lesser producer, this would become a weird, incel, self-hating, Asian-hating-Asian . . ." Chieng said, catching Park's eye. "Thank God for the delicate hands of Mr. Park to come and thread that needle."

Chieng and Hsu wrapped their scene at around 1:30 A.M. It was nearly three when the crew moved to the final location of the day: an external shot of the luxury apartment tower where Chieng and Hsu's scene supposedly took place. When we arrived, crew members were panicked, because city workers had set up to do late-night construction in the frame. Park looked at the shot and assured them that it would be O.K.

"I've heard people say that being a director is like answering a hundred questions with certainty at any given moment," Tomine whispered to me. "Like, right now, I have no idea if this is a relaxed or stressed situation. I can't tell."

They got the shot and, just before four, broke for the weekend. Park wove through the crew, shaking hands and thanking everyone by name.

In November, Park was in the middle of editing "Shortcomings," trying to incorporate notes from his producers and financiers. There were still debates about where the film's tone should ultimately land—how it should balance ugliness with levity. "I'm very protective of it," he said. Having gone along with direction and notes for so long, he was surprised by how testy he could be in responding to feedback, often writing long, overly detailed e-mails explaining why seemingly minor changes bothered him. "Being that person does not come natural to me," he said. "I don't even like the feeling of being that person. But I just can't help it with this." He found one note, suggesting that they add more broad comedy, "insulting." He joked that he wanted to make the film "appeal to less people," not more. "Just appeal as strongly to the people who would be into it as possible, and really make it right for those people."

Who were those people?

"Certain Asian Americans. But not all."

He guessed that responses to the film would be mixed, and said that that would be all right. I asked if he thought "Shortcomings" had benefitted from the recent run of successful Asian American films. "It makes it easier to get this made, but it makes it harder to get it made right," he said. "In the sense that movies like 'The Farewell' or 'Minari'—these great movies that I love, and even 'Everything Everywhere,' to a degree—they all are great pieces of work. But they're also . . ." He paused. "They have those traditional markers. Themes of family. If not an immigrant experience, some overseas thing happening. There's always an elder involved. Those are all markers that we look for—even Asian Americans look for—to judge the authenticity of something. My goal is to try to make it as authentic as possible with none of those markers at the center of the story."

"Shortcomings" was accepted to Sundance. In January, a few days before the festival, I spoke to Park at his home, in Studio City. He looked exhausted. He had recently shown the movie to some friends who weren't actors or art-house fans, and he thought the fact that it was populated by so many philandering creeps made them uncomfortable. "They said they liked it," he told me, with a hint of worry on his face. "But I could kinda feel that they were a little bummed out at the end." I asked if he was hoping to make a splash at Sundance. Ho, his production partner, had been at the festival in 2002, when Justin Lin's buzzy hit "Better Luck Tomorrow" attracted new interest after a racist question about the film's "amoral" depiction of young Asian Americans derailed a post-screening Q.&A. Maybe something similar would happen? Park finally laughed. "This movie is just a movie. It's not a movement. That's a good thing for us."

From afar, "Shortcomings" appeared to be a success at Sundance. On social media, the film was described as charming and funny, with all the breeziness of an expertly crafted rom-com, until viewers realized there was very little "rom." Early reviews held it up as a sort of anti-"Crazy Rich Asians."

A couple of days after the festival, I Zoomed with Park. On the wall behind him were family photos and a poster for the "Shortcomings" graphic novel. He still looked worn out.

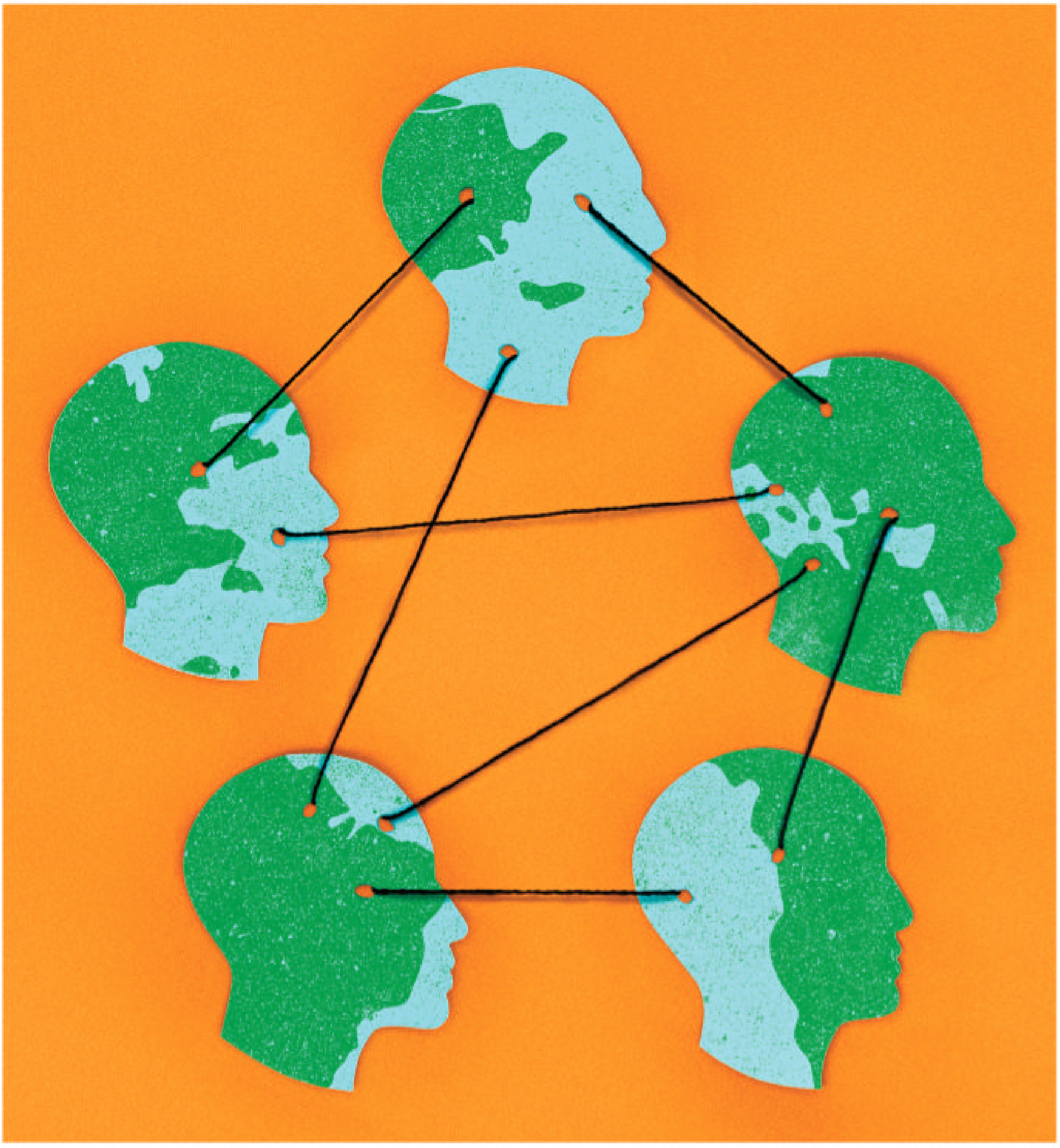
He told me how emotional he'd been before the first screening; he hadn't felt that way since the début of his first play, at U.C.L.A. It's customary for the filmmaker to provide an introduction at the première, and Park had written a short speech touching on the recent shootings at the lunar New Year celebrations in Monterey Park, as well as on what Tomine's book meant to him—the importance of showing these flawed characters, his pride in bringing them to life. But he had been so anxious that he began ad-libbing. "I had never been so nervous before around an audience," he said to me. "I just started telling them how nervous I was, and how strange all this was for me. I had never worked so hard on one thing for so long. And to finally show it was—I think I talked about how there's a part of me that just wants every single person to like it, but that's a completely unrealistic thing, but how it stems from this part of me that just wants to be liked by everybody. And I started using the audience almost as my therapist." I laughed. Park smiled. "It got a good laugh, but I was being genuine, you know? And then how this intense desire to be liked can be crippling, especially if you're an artist. And then I introduced the film." ♦

ANNALS OF INQUIRY

YOU FIRST

Does anyone really know what it means to be "Indigenous"?

BY MANVIR SINGH



In a period of empire, the term separated white settlers from their racial others.

Identity evolves. Social categories shrink or expand, become stiffer or more elastic, more specific or more abstract. What it means to be white or Black, Indian or American, able-bodied or not shifts as we tussle over language, as new groups take on those labels and others strip them away.

On August 3, 1989, the Indigenous identity evolved. Moringe ole Parkipuny, a Maasai activist and a former member of the Tanzanian Parliament, spoke before the U.N. Working Group on Indigenous Populations, in Geneva—the first African ever to do so. "Our cultures and way of life are viewed as outmoded, inimical to national pride, and a hindrance to progress," he said. As a result, pastoralists like the Maasai, along with hunter-gatherers, "suffer from common problems which characterize the plight of indigenous peoples throughout the world. The most fundamental rights to maintain our specific cultural identity and the land that constitutes the foundation of our existence as a people are not respected by the state and fellow citizens who belong to the mainstream population."

Parkipuny's speech was the culmination of an astonishing ascent. Born in a remote village near Tanzania's Rift Valley, he attended school after British authorities demanded that each family "contribute" a son to be educated. His grandfather urged him to flunk out, but he refused. "I already had a sense of how Maasai were being treated," he told the anthropologist Dorothy Hodgson in 2005. "I decided I must go on." He eventually earned an M.A. in development studies from the University of Dar es Salaam.

In his master's thesis, Parkipuny condemned the Masai Range Project, a twenty-million-dollar scheme funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development to boost livestock productivity. Naturally, then, U.S.A.I.D. was resistant when the Tanzanian government hired him to join the project. In the end, he was sent to the United States to learn about "proper ranches." He travelled around until, one day, a Navajo man invited him to visit the Navajo Nation, the reservation in the Southwest.

"I stayed with them for two weeks, and then with the Hopi for two weeks," he told Hodgson. "It was my first introduction to the indigenous world. I was struck by the similarities of our problems." The disrepair of the roads reminded him of the poor condition of cattle trails in Maasailand.

Parkipuny had always thrived on confrontations with authority. Once, as a high schooler, he was nearly expelled when he burned grass (the Maasai method of bush clearing) instead of cutting it, as instructed. He later recalled that, when the headmaster threatened to hit him, he replied, "If you beat me with a stick I will get mine, because my traditions do not allow this. I ask you to give me another punishment." This outspokenness propelled his activism. Following his American sojourn, he started to publicize the Maasai's plight in international circles, linking it with other struggles. He met members of tribal nations in New Mexico and Canada to sharpen his understanding of Indigenous issues, and allied with the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, headquartered in Copenhagen.

By the time Parkipuny showed up in Geneva, the concept of "indigenous" had already undergone major transformations. The word—from the Latin *indigena*, meaning "native" or "sprung from the land"—has been used in English since at least 1588, when a diplomat referred to Samoyed peoples in Si-

ILLUSTRATION BY LAUREN PETERS-COLLAER

beria as "Indigenæ, or people bred upon that very soyle." Like "native," "indigenous" was used not just for people but for flora and fauna as well, suffusing the term with an air of wildness and detaching it from history and civilization. The racial flavor intensified during the colonial period until, again like "native," "indigenous" served as a partition, distinguishing white settlers—and, in many cases, their slaves—from the non-Europeans who occupied lands before them.

Then came the nineteen-sixties and seventies. Liberation movements flourished. In New Zealand, the Polynesian Panthers worked with the group Ngā Tamatoa to rally for Maori rights. In the United States, the Red Power movement spawned groups like the American Indian Movement and the International Indian Treaty Council. Inspired by decolonization, activists from these groups coalesced, turning indigeneity into a global identity. What linked its members was firstness. Peoples like the Maori and the Sioux are not just marginalized minorities, activists stressed; they are aboriginal nations whose land and sovereignty have been usurped. With time, however, the identity was stretched further. When Parkipuny showed up in Geneva, activists were consciously remodelling indigeneity to encompass marginalized peoples worldwide, including, with Parkipuny's help, in Africa.

Today, nearly half a billion people qualify as Indigenous. If they were a single country, it would be the world's third most populous, behind China and India. Exactly who counts as Indigenous, however, is far from clear. A video for the U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues begins, "They were always here—the original inhabitants." Yet many peoples who are now considered Indigenous don't claim to be aboriginal—the Maasai among them. According to Maasai oral histories, their ancestors arrived in Tanzania several hundred years ago from a homeland they call Kerio, likely situated near South Sudan.

Conversely, being first doesn't seem to make you Indigenous. A handful of Gaelic monks and then the Vikings were the first people to arrive in Iceland (they settled there earlier than the Maori arrived in New Zealand), yet their descendants, the Icelanders, are rarely touted as Indigenous. Farther east, modern-day Scandinavians can trace most of their ancestry to migrations occurring in 4000 and in 2500 B.C., but it's the Sami reindeer herders, whose Siberian ancestors arrived in Scandinavia closer to 1500 B.C., who get an annual entry in the "Indigenous World" yearbook.

In place of firstness, a U.N. fact sheet lists self-identification as the key criterion. This doesn't quite work, either. It is true that some surprising candidates have gained recognition through activist self-designation, such as the Mincéirs of Ireland. (The Mincéirs, sometimes mistakenly called "Irish gypsies," may have separated from the settled Irish population only several hundred years ago.) Other such groups have been denied recognition. In 1999, when Basters, mixed-race descendants of Khoi pastoralists and Afrikaners, read a statement at a U.N. forum about Indigenous affairs, hundreds of delegates walked out in protest. At the same time, many people are called Indigenous without their knowledge or consent.

If it is neither necessary nor sufficient for the Indigenous to be indigenous, what fills the conceptual space? A natural candidate, worryingly, is primitiveness. As several recent books show, centuries of colonialism have entangled indigeneity with outdated images of simple, timeless peoples unsullied by history. In "Beyond Settler Time," Mark Rifkin observes that popular representations freeze Indigenous peoples in "a simulacrum of pastness." In "Prophets and Ghosts: The Story of Salvage Anthropology," Samuel J. Redman describes how efforts to document dying Indigenous cultures often centered on a search for "an idyllic, heavily romanticized, and apparently already bygone era of uncorrupted primitive societies."

The conflation of indigeneity with primitiveness can be stifling. Indigenous intellectuals—including the Lenape scholar Joanne Barker and the Maori scholar Evan Poata-Smith—write about the pressure to adopt identities that are "primordial," "naturalistic," and "unchanging." Fail to do so, they say, and you risk looking inauthentic. Rather than being harmless, Barker notes in "Native Acts" (2011), such standards make it "impossible for Native peoples to narrate the historical and social complexities of cultural exchange, change, and transformation—to claim cultures and identities that are conflicted, messy, uneven, modern, technological, mixed."

Indigeneity is powerful. It can give a platform to the oppressed. It can turn local David-vs.-Goliath struggles into international campaigns. Yet there's also something troubling about categorizing a wildly diverse array of peoples around the world within a single identity—particularly one born of an ideology of social evolutionism, crafted in white-settler states, and burdened with colonialist baggage. Can the status of "Indigenous" really be globalized without harming the people it is supposed to protect?

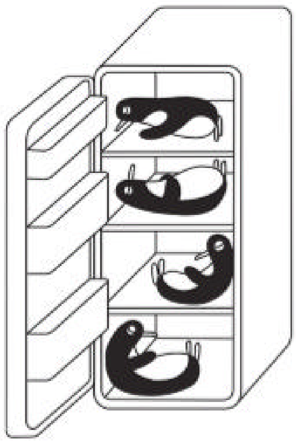
Peoples in Australia, New Zealand, and North America have long sent petitions to British royalty. Two Indigenous leaders—the Haudenosaunee chief Deskaheh and the Maori prophet T. W. Rātana—even appealed to the League of Nations for recognition, in 1923 and 1924, respectively. But before the Second World War Indigenous people appealed to international audiences only as representatives of local groups. To understand the origins of a global Indigenous identity, we need to turn to the activist networks that formed in the nineteen-sixties and seventies. And this means turning to George Manuel.

Born in 1921 in the Shuswap territory of British Columbia, Manuel started to think seriously about a global Indigenous identity in 1971. He was then the president of the National Indian Brotherhood, a young organization representing Canada's two hundred and fifty thousand officially recognized "status Indians." When the Canadian government arranged for a delegation to go to the South Pacific to learn about the Maoris' place in New Zealand, Manuel was invited along as the representative of Canada's Indigenous peoples.

The start of the trip was frustrating. Like a tourist visiting North Korea, Manuel was whisked from one exhibition to another, presented with a Shangri-La fantasy of the Maori experience. Yet he was determined to escape the spectacle and, when given a chance, he invited Maori politicians and a troupe of Maori entertainers to his hotel room for an honest chat.

By this point, Manuel was fluent in

the politics of Canada’s First Nations. As he told the Yukon newspaper the Whitehorse *Daily* later that year, “We want to maintain our special status, our special rights, and we want to go deeper and find evidence to prove we have special rights as the original inhabitants.” What struck him about his unofficial tour was that the Maori were engaged in the same struggle. They, too, were an Indigenous people fighting a white Commonwealth nation for land, representation, and cultural survival: “What we are doing here in Canada is a part of a world wide movement for cultural autonomy and aboriginal rights of native people.”



From New Zealand, Manuel travelled to northern Australia, where he encountered even fiercer assimilation campaigns. When invited to talk to an assembly of Aboriginal students, he condemned Australian paternalism and told the students to “be proud you are dark. We have every reason to be as proud as the white man. And maybe more.” He pointed to their shared persecution: “Just as much as the Maoris and Aborigines, the Indian people in Canada are dark people in a White Commonwealth.”

The trip stirred up dreams of a conference that would set the stage for “some more lasting institution.” In October, 1975, the vision materialized. Delegates from nineteen countries—almost all in the Americas or Oceania; none from Africa or Asia—met on the Tseshaht reservation, on Vancouver Island, where they founded the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. Manuel was elected the first president. In the lead-up to the conference, attendees decided not to call themselves “Aboriginal people” and went instead with “Indigenous people,” defined partly as people “who are descendants of the earliest populations living in the area and who do not, as a group, control the national government of the countries within which they live.”

The expansion of indigeneity is visible in the history of the World Council, and then in the U.N. Working Group on Indigenous Populations, which was founded in 1982, and—in part because it benefitted from more regular meetings, the resources of the U.N., and the promise of drafting international law—effectively supplanted the council. Across two decades, the working group metamorphosed from an overwhelmingly American assemblage into an international one. At its first meeting, all but one of the ten Indigenous groups represented were from the Americas; in 1984, Asians started showing up, and in 1989 Parkipuny opened the floor for Africans.

The process had its hiccups. The Cuban diplomat who served as a Special Rapporteur for the group in the nineteen-nineties, Miguel Alfonso Martínez, insisted that Asians and Africans could not qualify as Indigenous. Delegates felt otherwise; they sought a truly transnational identity. But, after years of debate, they decided that no objective definition was possible. Even the World Council’s stipulation that an Indigenous people didn’t control the national government wasn’t quite on target. On the one hand, the Icelanders, who haven’t been considered Indigenous, were for a period under the absolute rule of a Danish king. On the other hand, the U.N. deems the Samoans to be Indigenous, and yet they are the dominant social, cultural, and political group of Samoa.

The U.N., in its 2021 report on the “State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples,” determined that eighty-six per cent of them live in Asia, Africa, and the Pacific. Who’s entitled to the status remains a subject of contention. Hmong people living in Minnesota send delegates to the U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, in New York; Dalits in India, the Roma in Eastern Europe, and Christians in Saudi Arabia remain, for the most part, outside the circle of indigeneity. Identifying which criteria are at play is tricky, but anthropologists and social theorists like Adam Kuper and André Béteille argue that our concept of indigeneity is bound up with outdated ideas about so-called primitive peoples. The tropes persist; we have merely replaced one set of terms for another. Even if you are not aboriginal, you can count as Indigenous if you come across as simple, egalitarian, culturally encapsulated, spiritually attuned to nature, and somehow isolated from history and civilization.

When Parkipuny appeared in Geneva, the Maasai were well established as emblems of “primitive” Africa. With spears, shields, and stretched earlobes, they adorned postcards, documentaries, travelogues, and coffee-table books. You’d see a stoic, ochre-coated man wearing an ostrich-feather headdress like a lion’s mane, or a woman with a shaved head staring at the camera, her neck lost amid beaded necklaces. Almost always, the Maasai were pictured draped in bold red fabric, a shocking burst of fire in landscapes of brown and green. (Photographers relieve them of their sunglasses and watches.)

For decades, the Tanzanian government exploited this imagery. As tourism and big-game hunting flourished, photographs of the Maasai decorated brochures and guidebooks: human scenery garnishing Africa’s untamed wilderness. At the same time, government officials sought to justify the expropriation of Maasai land for more lucrative projects, like wildlife tourism. Pastoralism and conservation were incompatible, the party line suggested; maintaining one image of wildness (the pristine, wildebeest-filled grassland) justified an attack on the other (the Stone Age cattle herder).

Parkipuny reclaimed the imagery of primitivism using the language of indigeneity. Soon after returning from Geneva, he co-founded the first Maasai N.G.O., calling it Korongoro Integrated People Oriented to Conservation, or KIPOC, which means “we will recover” in the Maasai language. In a document for donors, the organization explained that the “indigenous minority nationalities” in Tanzania had “maintained the fabric of their culture.” Rather than being respected, however, they were “looked down at, as backward and evolutionary relics,” and denied access to services like education. The Maasai crusade was thus “part of the global struggle of indigenous peoples to restore respect to their rights, cultural identity and to the land of their birth.”

The rhetoric was effective. Two Dutch organizations promptly sent money for facilities, salaries, and operating expenses. In 1994, Parkipuny helped establish an umbrella organization, PINGOS (Pastoralists and Indigenous Peoples N.G.O.s) Forum, that advocated for Tanzania's pastoralists and hunter-gatherers as Indigenous Africans. Yet, even as international groups rallied behind him, Parkipuny found growing resistance, sometimes violent, from his fellow-Tanzanians. The reason was not just his role as an advocate of Maasai interests. In the book "Becoming Maasai, Becoming Indigenous" (2011), Hodgson showed that another Maasai organization, Inyuat e Maa, aroused far less resistance. The domestic opposition that Parkipuny encountered partly reflected his style, which many Maasai found combative. But it also likely stemmed from his insistence on indigeneity, which was seen as promoting "tribalism"—something Tanzania wanted to avoid. Aware of events in neighboring countries like Kenya, the government feared that ethnic mobilization could invite insurgent violence and economic instability.

Organizing on the basis of indigeneity hindered interethnic coalition-building, too. Other ethnic groups saw indigeneity as something the Maasai exploited to funnel money and attention toward themselves. At a PINGOS meeting in 2000, there were impassioned complaints that PINGOS, supposedly acting for all of Tanzania's pastoralists and hunter-gatherers, was really a Maasai oligarchy. As a Maasai activist and lawyer admitted to Hodgson half a decade later, "One problem with 'indigenous' is that everyone who hears it thinks 'Maasai.' So it worked at the national level to limit rather than expand our possible alliances and collaborations." By the time he spoke to Hodgson, he and many other Maasai activists had largely dropped the rhetoric of indigeneity: "Now we focus on building alliances with the nation, not with international actors."

A politics built around indigeneity, many organizers fear, can reify ethnic boundaries. It encourages people to justify why their ethnic group, and not another, deserves particular resources and accommodations. It weakens domestic ties, which are otherwise critical for oppressed minorities. But it also contributes to one of the stranger consequences arising from a rhetoric of indigeneity: its co-option by far-right nationalists. As peoples like the Maasai have lost confidence in the rhetoric, ethnic nationalists worldwide have come to embrace it. Writing for a Hindu Right propaganda Web site in 2020, a columnist observed, "In the game of woke, we Hindus actually hold all possible cards. We are people of color. We come from an indigenous culture that is different from the organized religions. . . . How could we not be winning every argument?"

In 1987, two years before Parkipuny's historic speech at the U.N. Working Group on Indigenous Populations, five delegates from India landed in Geneva for the group's annual meeting. They represented the newly established Indian Council of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, and were led by figures such as Professor Ram Dayal Munda, a linguist with a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. Their goal was to establish the indigeneity of India's "tribal" communities, also known as Adivasis.

The delegates' arguments followed a decades-long discussion about Adivasi identity. At the time of India's independence, in 1947, people disagreed on how to think about the communities inhabiting the country's hills and forests. The Indian sociologist G. S. Ghurye declared them to be "backward Hindus." Mahatma Gandhi considered them a peasant caste to be integrated into the nation. Yet the English-born anthropologist Verrier Elwin, starting in the nineteen-thirties and forties, favored an account that was both idealized and soaked in primitivist imagery. He imagined Adivasis to be the inverse of modernity: free, primordial, attuned to the rhythms of nature. The image appealed to Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, and the conception has stuck. To this day, the Indian government defines "Scheduled Tribes"—an official designation that, for many Indians, is largely equivalent to the Sanskrit-derived term Adivasi—based on five criteria: "(i) indications of primitive traits, (ii) distinctive culture, (iii) geographical isolation, (iv) shyness of contact with the community at large, and (v) backwardness."

Given these associations, it is not surprising that the international community, including the U.N. and the International Labor Organization, has embraced the Adivasis as Indigenous. In some instances, indigeneity has paid off. In 2014, with the help of Amnesty International and Survival International, the Dongria Kondh community, in eastern India, temporarily blocked the U.K.-based company Vedanta Resources from mining the Niyamgiri hills for bauxite.

Yet there is also what the anthropologist Alpa Shah calls a "dark side of indigeneity." Between 1999 and 2008, she spent some thirty months living with Adivasis, mostly of the Munda ethnic group, in the Indian state of Jharkhand. Her book "In the Shadows of the State" (2010) offers a sobering picture of how activism organized around indigeneity can trap the communities it is supposed to liberate.

Many of the problems start with image management. To secure their status as Indigenous, Adivasis have needed to look tribal and non-modern. Urban activists necessarily endorse images of them as children of the forest. The resulting policies can be a boost for activists, intent on building domestic and international platforms. But they can also lead to what Shah calls "eco-incarceration," reinforcing Adivasis' marginalization. Consider their elephant issue. In one year, in a village of about five hundred and fifty people, Shah saw elephants destroy five houses. They devoured crops. They kicked a woman, leaving her with serious back injuries. Nearby villages were similarly terrorized, with nine people trampled to death.

The Mundas were not happy. They told Shah they wanted to chop down trees to stop the elephant incursion, but government policy, ostensibly aimed at helping them preserve their traditions, prohibited them from doing so. When she asked how they could survive without the jungle, many Mundas told her that she had it backward. They remembered a past when they cleared the trees rather than living surrounded by them. "After all, not so long ago there were no elephants here because there was no forest," one villager told her.

Eco-incarceration goes beyond exposing Mundas to elephant attacks. Soon after arriving in India, Shah found Indigenous-rights activists pushing for anti-migration laws that would prevent Adivasis from taking factory jobs in neighboring states. The activists justified the restrictions with paternalistic language, claiming (no doubt with some truth) that factories were economically and sexually exploitative. But the proposed solution ignored the many reasons

Adivasis have for leaving, like escaping repressive home environments. In the past several decades, thousands of Adivasis have joined militant insurgent groups, in large part, Shah argues in her new book, "Nightmarch," because guerrillas treat them as equals, rather than as savages. Devoted to the image of happy Adivasis living at one with nature, urban activists end up denying them dignity and basic freedoms.

This isn't to say that people who enact tribal caricatures necessarily chafe at doing so. In "Adivasi Art and Activism," Alice Tilche, who worked with Adivasis at a "tribal museum" in Gujarat, reports that many took pride in primitivist performances. Others treated the dress-up as a kind of job, necessary for securing the benefits set aside for Scheduled Tribes. One Adivasi saw it as a professional obligation that he didn't mind complying with: "Like policemen wear their uniforms—that's what we wear."

Still, there's something troubling when advocates and patrons urge their putative beneficiaries to perform Victorian daydreams. As an anthropologist who works in remote parts of South America and Southeast Asia, I have seen how the primitivist ideologies connected to indigeneity can breed resentment. On a recent field trip to Colombia's eastern rain forests, I asked a Huottüja teacher what he thought about the word "indigenous" (*indígena*). He said that he knew it only as "a word of discrimination"—something that implied his people were "savage, like wild animals."

On July 4, 2009, Maasai pastoralists in the Loliondo area of Tanzania awoke to police officers and security forces demanding that they leave their villages. Hundreds of people and thousands of cattle were evicted. Over the next two days, the police harassed and jailed Maasai who grazed cattle in the area. When Maasai leaders refused to send their people away, the police burned as many as a hundred and fifty homesteads. In total, some ten thousand pastoralists were affected by the evictions.

The reason for the expulsions was wildlife tourism. Since the early nineteen-nineties, the Tanzanian government has leased hunting rights to the Otterlo Business Corporation (sometimes spelled Ortello), a U.A.E.-based company set up for Gulf élites who want to frolic in the Tanzanian wilderness. The Maasai kept their land rights but usually stayed away during the few months when sheikhs and millionaires arrived. In 2009, however, one of the harshest droughts in recent memory forced pastoralists to scout out grass and water in Loliondo just as the Dubai royals were supposed to arrive.

"The Maasai is good for a tourist's photograph, useful to carry your bags to the camp, or even to guide you to see the animals," Parkipuny told the *Guardian* at the time. "But in the end the animals are far more valuable than people."

The evictions, combined with government plans to seize fifteen hundred square kilometres of Maasai land for the Emiratis, sparked a new wave of activism. Twenty thousand Maasai—more than a quarter of the population of Loliondo—turned out to protest. Three thousand women gathered and met with traditional and elected leaders. The Maasai of Loliondo contacted leaders and N.G.O.s from five districts with significant Maasai populations, mobilizing close to two hundred thousand citizens who threatened to abandon the ruling political party. In July and August, 2013, a delegation of eighty-nine Maasai travelled to Tanzania's capital, Dodoma, where they demanded that the government reverse its decision. More than ninety students from the University of Dar es Salaam joined them.

In "Selling the Serengeti" (2016), the geographer Benjamin Gardner observed that this activism differed from the indigeneity-centered organizing that preceded it. Instead, "this movement was largely based on the idea that the Tanzanian state was unfairly persecuting Tanzanian citizens, specifically Tanzanian villagers who happened to be Maasai."

Did the new approach work? In September, 2013, the Tanzanian Prime Minister said that the government would halt its plan to seize the land. Yet four years later there was a new wave of evictions, in which some hundred and eighty-five homesteads were torched and around sixty-eight hundred people left homeless. Finally, in 2022, a commissioner said that the government would continue the plan of setting aside land for wildlife—resulting, Maasai leaders say, in the dislocation of seventy thousand people.

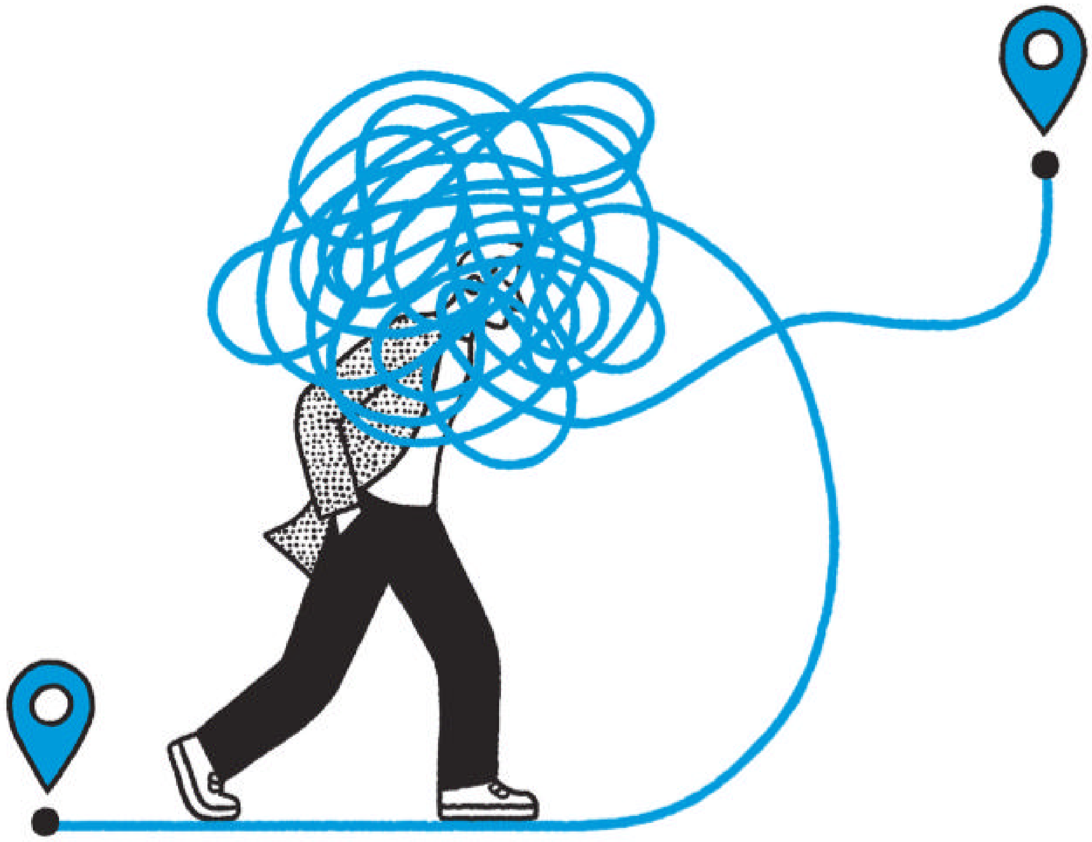
Parkipuny died in July, 2013, amid the evictions. A Facebook page honoring him is bedecked with comments in Swahili like "*Tutakukumbuka daima Baba*" ("We will always remember you, Father"). With the newest wave of displacement, his daughter Yassi Moringe recalled, "everyone, especially the elder people, said, 'Oh, they are taking us out of Maasailand because Parkipuny is not there.' Everybody was saying, 'I wish Parkipuny was here.'"

In a way, the evictions have brought him back. Indigeneity has reëntered Maasai activism. In April, 2022, thousands of Maasai signed a letter calling on "human rights organizations, media and other citizens who value Indigenous human rights" to oppose the Tanzanian government's evictions and other actions against the Maasai. The word "Indigenous" appears nine times in the short letter, with two references to the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. "We Maasai Indigenous community are appealing for international support so that our land and our rights are respected," the letter urged.

Indigeneity is a project of hope. It was crafted by enterprising activists over years of strategizing, absorbing ideas from Red Power, Third Worldism, African and Asian anti-colonialism, and the environmental movement. With it, people sought a politics of the oppressed, aiming to protect land and sovereignty, to turn "backward" natives into respected stewards. When indigeneity promised to deliver on these goals, by attracting the support of international organizations, the natural temptation was to stretch the concept until it covered as many disempowered peoples as possible, even at the cost of coherence.

And incoherence, of course, was an invitation to all those discredited stereotypes. Although the temptation is to fault the brokers of indigeneity—the N.G.O.s, politicians, academics, and urban activists who have promoted its ever-widening application—the resurrection of primitiveness is just as much a testament to the stickiness of a trope. The idea of the primordial savage is appealing. A symbol of everything modernity is not, it serves as a foil for decrying civilization's corruption or for celebrating its achievements. But we cannot escape the colonial inheritance when we insist on summoning its ghosts. ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS



LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

A G.P.S. ROUTE FOR MY ANXIETY

BY JESSE EISENBERG

FROM: Home
TO: Local Y.M.C.A.
ESTIMATED TIME: Five hours

Exit your apartment through the service entrance so you don't have to make small talk with the doorman, who resents you.

Upon exiting, turn *left*. Going right would obviously be quicker, but you might run into the woman from your building whose name you don't remember.

Make a *quick left* at the rack of Citi Bikes. Avoid looking directly at the bikes and being reminded that you don't have an active life style.

Dangerously *cross the street* in the middle of the block to avoid the bodega where you embarrassed yourself last week by going in drunk and ordering Ben & Jerry's from the deli section.

Walk *straight* for three blocks in the wrong direction so that you can pass the movie theatre where you met your first girlfriend, Shira. Things seemed so much simpler then. Why couldn't you just have proposed to Shira? Did you think she would wait around for you to grow up? She was an incredibly appealing person, and many people liked her. It was hubris to think that she would wait for you.

As you *pass* the theatre, it will occur to you that you should have proposed there. Shira would have thought it was so romantic. You could have cutesily conscripted the theatre staff to be in on the proposal. They could have done something kitschy but sweet, like hiding the ring in a tub of popcorn, and Shira might have said something charming, like "I wish you had proposed to me with some Raisinets." You would have laughed and kissed her. Your life would have taken a nice turn with Shira. You would be a father now, maybe.

Make an *extreme right* to avoid the movie theatre. Walk briskly for several minutes to shake off the feeling of what could have been.

Take out your cell phone and pretend to be on an important call because you're about to pass some canvassers for the A.S.P.C.A. Your mix of narcissism and self-hatred is so deep and convoluted that you can't even bring yourself to spare five seconds to save animals.

This might be a nice time to *listen* to a podcast—maybe one from the BBC that doesn't overlap with your own life and make you feel competitive. Something about the Bauhaus movement might be comforting.

Make a *left* for no other reason than to pass the office building where you interned for that documentary-film company when you thought that documentaries were going to change the world.

Make an *immediate hard right* to avoid the corner where you were fired by the documentary-film company for being too vocal at meetings.

Follow the pedestrian path to the Williamsburg Bridge. This will take you well out of your way, but you think it might be a nice idea to watch the sunset from the bridge.

As you *arrive* at the midpoint of the bridge and see the sun going down, take a deep breath and try hard to live in the moment. This will be impossible for you. You haven't been able to enjoy a sunset since you upped your dose of venlafaxine.

Stare at the sunset and wonder why it has no impact on you. How is something so viscerally, timelessly beautiful leaving you completely cold? How is it possible that your antidepressant is keeping you functional but also stifling any semblance of spiritual epiphany?

Turn *back* and exit the bridge.

Walk uptown for several minutes, searching for any meaning in your life and not finding it.

Arrive at your destination, the local Y.M.C.A., which is actually five blocks from your apartment.

It is now dark out.

Stand outside the Y.M.C.A. for several minutes, watching other people go in.

Some of the people look strong.

Some of the people look tall.

Some of the people look mean.

Make a *U-turn* when safe.

Head back home. ♦

LETTER FROM ISRAEL

MINISTER OF CHAOS

Itamar Ben-Gvir and the politics of reaction.

BY RUTH MARGALIT

Late last year, as Israel swore in the most right-wing government in its history, a despairing joke circulated online. A picture broken into squares to resemble a CAPTCHA—the test designed to tell you from a robot—depicted the members of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet. The caption read, "Select the squares in which people who have been indicted appear." The correct answer involved half of them. It was the kind of message that has become typical of Israel's center and left in recent years: grim, cynical, ultimately resigned.

A few weeks later, Netanyahu's cabinet introduced the first stage in a judicial overhaul that would weaken the country's Supreme Court and render the government largely impervious to oversight. Right-wing legislators had floated a similar measure before, but it was regarded as too drastic. What changed, Netanyahu's opponents say, is that he is a defendant now, on trial for allegedly providing political favors to tycoons in exchange for personal gifts and positive press coverage—charges that he denies. By removing constraints on executive power, the overhaul threatened to place Israel among the ranks of such illiberal democracies as Hungary and Poland. In an extraordinarily blunt speech, the country's chief justice, Esther Hayut, called it a "fatal blow" to democratic institutions. Since then, tens of thousands of protesters have poured into the streets of Tel Aviv and other cities each Saturday. One marcher's placard summed up the sentiment: "For Sale: Democracy. Model: 1948. No brakes."

Netanyahu leads Likud, a party defined by conservative and populist ideas. Likud has long taken hard-line positions on national security, but its leaders traditionally venerated the rule of law, maintained a balance of power, and upheld free expression. Netanyahu, too, used to court centrist voters, attempting to convince the undecided. But, as peace talks with Palestinians have failed and religious nationalism has gained force, the Israeli left has shrivelled, and Netanyahu's party has become more extreme. Recently, a Likud lawmaker put forth a proposal that would effectively bar many Arab politicians from running for parliament.

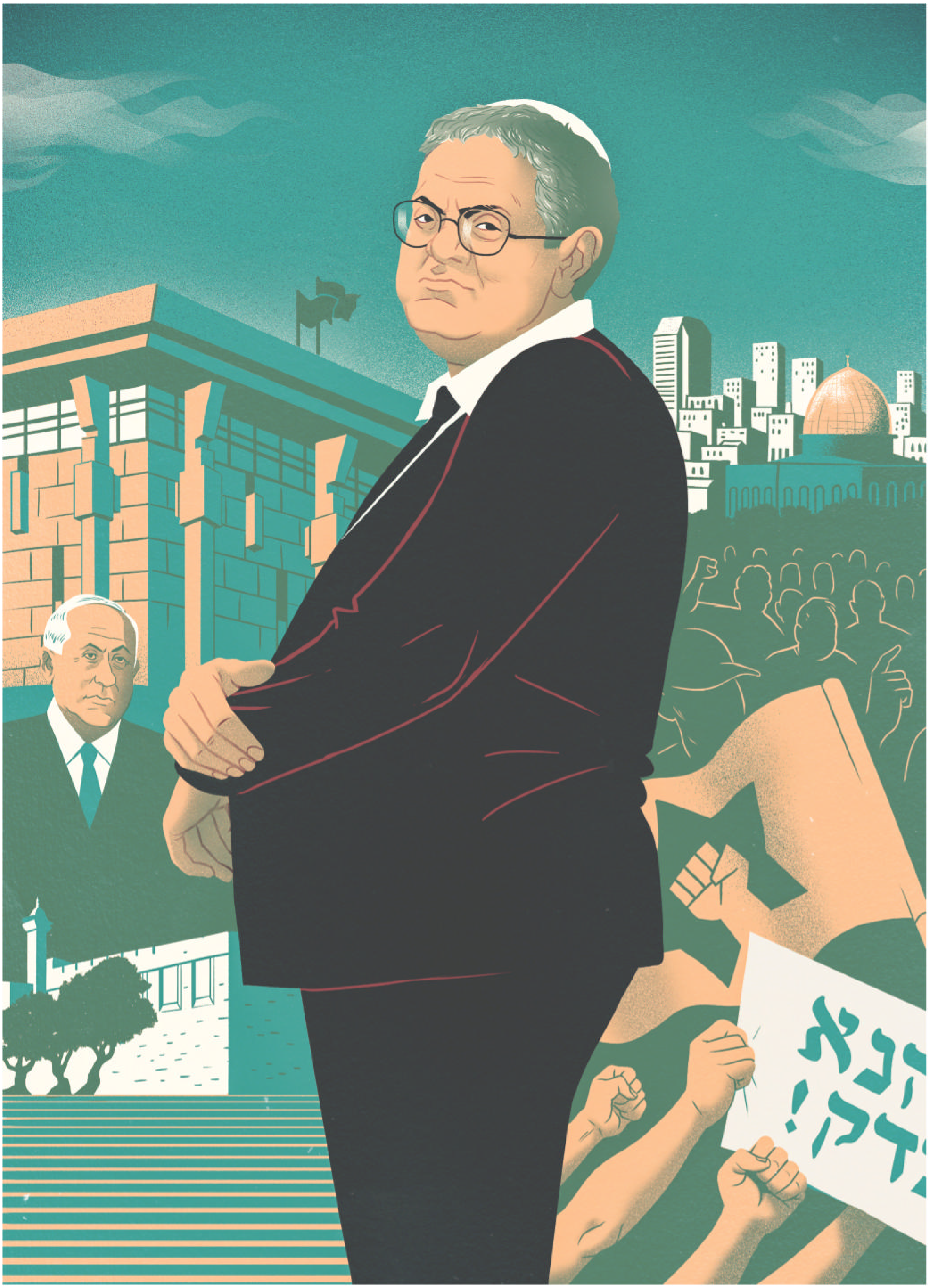
Protesters warn that Israeli headlines have begun to read like a manual for future autocracies, with ministers seemingly handpicked to undermine the departments they run. The new justice minister intends to strip away the judiciary's power. The communications minister has threatened to defund Israel's public broadcaster, reportedly hoping to funnel money to a channel favorable to Netanyahu. The minister of heritage has called organizations representing Reform Jews an "active danger" to Jewish identity.

No one, however, offends liberal and centrist Israelis quite like Itamar Ben-Gvir. Ben-Gvir, who entered parliament in 2021, leads a far-right party called Otzma Yehudit, or Jewish Power. His role model and ideological wellspring has long been Meir Kahane, a Brooklyn rabbi who moved to Israel in 1971 and, during a single term in the Knesset, tested the moral limits of the country. Israeli politicians strive to reconcile Israel's identities as a Jewish state and a democracy. Kahane argued that "the idea of a democratic Jewish state is nonsense." In his view, demographic trends would inevitably turn Israel's non-Jews into a majority, and so the ideal solution was "the immediate transfer of the Arabs." To Kahane, Arabs were "dogs" who "must sit quietly or get the hell out." His rhetoric was so virulent that lawmakers from both sides of the aisle used to walk out of the Knesset when he spoke. His party, Kach (Thus), was finally barred from parliament in 1988. Jewish Power is an ideological offshoot of Kach; Ben-Gvir served as a Kach youth leader and has called Kahane a "saint."

Ben-Gvir, who is forty-six, has been convicted on at least eight charges, including supporting a terrorist organization and incitement to racism, compiling a criminal record so long that, when he appeared before a judge, "we had to change the ink on the printer," Dvir Kariv, a former official in the Shin Bet intelligence agency, told me. As recently as last October, Netanyahu refused to share a stage with him, or even to be seen with him in photographs. But a series of disappointing elections persuaded Netanyahu to change his mind.

Netanyahu has been Israel's dominant political figure for a generation, serving as Prime Minister for an unprecedented fifteen years. In 2021, though, he was sidelined by a parliamentary coalition that, for the first time, included an independent Arab party. During the elections last year, Netanyahu returned with what one legal scholar described as "a knife between his teeth." To secure a winning coalition, he orchestrated an alliance between Jewish Power and another far-right party, Religious Zionism. The alliance ended up winning the third-largest share of seats in parliament, outperforming expectations so radically that Netanyahu now faced the disagreeable prospect of sharing power with Ben-Gvir—a man whom the former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert described as a more imminent danger to Israel than a nuclear-armed Iran. Rather than give him a sinecure, Netanyahu named him the national-security minister. In Israel, the embattled left wing stopped asking whether a figure as divisive as Ben-Gvir could reach the highest levels of power. Instead, the question became: Can he be contained?

The Heichal David event hall, near Jerusalem's central bus station, hosts weddings, bar mitzvahs, and, once a year, a memorial for Kahane. The organizers chose the Heichal David, an m.c. there once announced, because it was the "only



Ben-Gvir built a career on provocation. As national-security minister, he'll oversee what one official calls a "private army."

ILLUSTRATION BY YONATAN POPPER

Bliss/Martin

"Whatever you do, don't look like a balloon."

hall in Jerusalem that doesn't employ Arabs." Last November, thirty-two years after Kahane was killed by an Egyptian American extremist in a Manhattan hotel, a rowdy crowd gathered in the hall to commemorate his legacy. T-shirts emblazoned with the slogan "Kahane Was Right" sold for nine dollars. Women—the few who attended—sat cordoned off behind a screen.

Ben-Gvir was scheduled to be the first speaker of the evening, but for weeks the press had dangled the question of his appearance as if it were a cliffhanger on a reality show. (Ben-Gvir agreed to join the cast of "Big Brother" in 2019, but an early election derailed the plan.) Ben-Gvir has been Kach's most visible ambassador. On his first date with his future wife, they visited the grave of Baruch Goldstein, an extremist settler who, in 1994, had gunned down twenty-nine Muslim worshippers at the Cave of the Patriarchs, a holy site for Muslims and Jews in Hebron. Until recently, a photograph of Goldstein hung on the Ben-Gvirs' living-room wall, at their home in the Kiryat Arba settlement in Hebron.

Ben-Gvir began attending the Kahane memorial when he was a teen-ager, and eventually became its host. He used to call up reporters, promising them provocations—such as a noose to threaten an Arab lawmaker—to entice them to cover the event. The movement was considered marginal. "It was a joke how small it was," Kariv, the former Shin Bet official, said. It has since expanded to include a political party (Jewish Power), a financial arm (the Fund to Save the People of Israel), and a militant anti-assimilation group (Lehava, or Flame). In the latest election, according to one estimate, a third of all Israeli soldiers voted for Ben-Gvir.

As Ben-Gvir entered government, he insisted that he had become more moderate, assuring one audience that he no longer believed "Arabs should be killed." Two of his mentors on the far right even broke with him over what they saw as unacceptable concessions. "Itamar may kill eight mosquitoes, instead of the two that his predecessors killed, but that's still not draining the swamp," Baruch Marzel, who served as a spokesman for Kach, said. The rift, an insider told me, was real: Marzel is a dour figure, a "first-generation Kahanist." Ben-Gvir is "second generation," tempering his bigotry with an Internet-friendly sense of humor. Some of his activists wear "Notorious I.B.G." shirts. (In one of his TikTok videos, viewed 1.3 million times, he kicks a soccer ball that he suggests represents Arab politicians. "I'm practicing kicking Odeh, Tibi, and Abbas to Syria," he says.) But the rift also helped Ben-Gvir electorally. He could now plausibly claim that he no longer represented the farthest extreme of the Israeli right.

Ben-Gvir became a lawyer in his mid-thirties, and has often displayed a knack for staying just within the bounds of the law. In 2015, he chided his followers to stop shouting "Death to the Arabs": "You should say 'Death to the terrorists.' That's legal with a stamp." Raphael Morris, a hard-right activist who heads a movement called Returning to the Temple Mount, told me, "I've learned from him how to challenge the system without crossing a red line." Kariv said that Ben-Gvir is "an extremist, but a pragmatic one. He knows how to walk between the raindrops."

Before the elections in 2019, advisers, hoping to cement what the press described as a newly "statesmanlike" image, urged Ben-Gvir to remove Goldstein's photograph from his wall. "I told him that people are afraid to vote for him," Berale Crombie, his campaign strategist at the time, told me. Ben-Gvir refused. "He was very scared of losing his base," Crombie said. After two failed attempts to win a seat in the Knesset, he finally relented: the picture came down. "Symbolically, this was crucial," Crombie, who remains friendly with Ben-Gvir, said. Within two years, according to one analysis, Ben-Gvir's support among voters went from a thirtieth of Likud's to as much as a third.

To secure a senior ministerial position, though, Ben-Gvir had to distance himself from the ideology that had made his reputation without turning away its ardent believers. At the memorial, he worked the room, smiling. He has a round face, wire-rimmed glasses, and a large white kippah that often sits askew. As he took the stage, his smile faded, and security guards closed around him. Ben-Gvir told the audience that he owed his religious identity to Kach, but he also emphasized moderation: "It's not a secret that today I'm not Rabbi Kahane." People shifted in their seats; some began to boo. "I don't support expelling all Arabs, and I won't make laws creating separate beaches for Jews and Arabs." More jeers. "But of course, of course we will work toward expelling terrorists from the country"—here the boos turned to applause—"for the character of the state, the settling of its land, and its Jewish identity." At the end of the speech, people rose to their feet, snapping photos. Still, his bodyguards had to whisk him out.

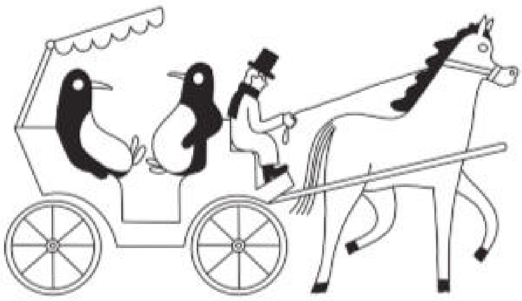
News coverage of the speech centered on the signs of dissent: "BEN-GVIR BOOED AT RABBI KAHANE'S MEMORIAL." For Ben-Gvir, this was a boon—the emphasis on the jeers was a step toward mainstream acceptance. But, as Rino Zror, a journalist who has spent years covering the far right, told me, it seemed as if the focus on the booing "came from *him*." Other journalists agreed, noting that Ben-Gvir had allowed a partial draft of his speech to leak out on social media. Last year, a supporter who was worried about his transformation approached Almog Cohen, a Jewish Power politician. "It's a ruse," Cohen said, in an exchange that was caught on tape. "You know what a Trojan horse is?"

Most Israelis first heard of Itamar Ben-Gvir in the fall of 1995—a tense time in Israeli history. Even as suicide bombers struck with alarming frequency, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin signed a historic peace accord with Palestinian leaders. But the deal conceded tracts of Israeli-occupied land in the West Bank, which the right wing considered a betrayal. Protests grew violent. On October 11th, a nineteen-year-old Ben-Gvir appeared on television, wearing a pale-blue T-shirt, with his arm in a sling. He was holding a Cadillac emblem that had been ripped from the Prime Minister's car. "Just like we got to this emblem, we can get to Rabin," he said. Three weeks later, a right-wing law student named Yigal Amir approached Rabin at a peace demonstration in Tel Aviv and shot him twice. Rabin died soon afterward.

Seven weeks later, attorneys from the state commission of inquiry visited Amir in his cell and questioned him about that night. Amir said that on the bus to Tel Aviv he had met a Likud activist "who told me that Itamar Ben-Gvir wanted to kill Rabin at the demonstration." (Ben-Gvir declined to be interviewed for this article, but an aide called this account false.) Amir knew Ben-Gvir from right-wing activist circles, but, he told the investigators, he had laughed off the idea that he might commit a killing. He was just a kid, Amir suggested—not a murderer but a provocateur.

Ben-Gvir grew up in Mevaseret Zion, a suburb of Jerusalem. When he was a child, he lived in a scruffy area that was once a transit camp for Jewish immigrants from Kurdistan, where his mother's family originated. In the years before the creation of the Israeli state, she had fought against British rule with the underground group known as the Irgun. His father, whose family came from Iraq, sold produce at the Jerusalem market.

In time, Ben-Gvir's family moved to a more upscale, tree-lined part of town. His parents were right wing, but they weren't ideologues; he has said that they occasionally voted for the left-wing Labor Party. Like many *mizrahi*, or Sephardic Jews, they were somewhere between secular and observant. Ben-Gvir was different. He became religious at twelve, and at fourteen—during the first Palestinian intifada—he was radicalized. "There was one murder after another, and I went to my mother and told her, 'This must be solved,'" he said last year, in an interview with the news site Mako.



One Friday, he asked his father to drive him to downtown Jerusalem, where a demonstration of leftist women convened each week. There, he formed a counter-protest of one. But he had made a rookie mistake: the women habitually dressed in black, and Ben-Gvir had worn black, too, so he was obliged to call his father for another shirt. Before long, though, he met Baruch Marzel and another Kach agitator, who introduced him to the movement. "At first, I thought that they were too extremist for me, but at one point I realized, Wait a minute, this isn't what the media portrays," he said.

Those who knew Ben-Gvir as a teenager recall an intelligent, charismatic boy with an easy smile. One school friend said that he was "a bit of an outsider," but added, using a term that denotes aggressive behavior, "There were much scarier *arsim* than Itamar." Ben-Gvir attended a vocational high school in Jerusalem, where a former teacher remembered him as serious and engaged—sitting in the front row, "like he didn't want to be disturbed." His affiliation with Kach was known at school, the teacher added, but it wasn't unusual: "Most students came from very right-wing families."

Ben-Gvir's ambition made him an outlier among the Kahanists. "Most of them are parasites," Kariv said. "They get up at noon, they don't study, and they don't work. Ben-Gvir was always very driven." Over time, he began recruiting others to Kach activities, which Kariv said ran mostly to vandalism: spray-painting "Kahane Was Right" and "Arabs Out" on buildings across Jerusalem; sabotaging water heaters on Arab families' roofs. A former Kach member told me that recruiting for the organization peaked in the aftermath of violent attacks: "Say there's a bombing and you hear someone yell 'Death to Arabs.' You come up to him, and ask, 'Want to join us?'" Ehud Olmert, who was Jerusalem's mayor at the time, told me, "Ben-Gvir belonged to a group that thrived and blossomed on the backs of those murdered in terrorist attacks." Once, after an attack in the Jerusalem market, Olmert was touring the scene when three men began to stalk him, shouting "Death to Arabs!" and "Coward!" One of them was Ben-Gvir. Olmert says that he turned and punched him in the face.

At sixteen, Ben-Gvir became a fixture at Kahane's Jewish Idea Yeshiva, in Jerusalem. (When I mentioned

Ben-Gvir's "student days" to the former Kach member, he laughed and said, "It's not that kind of yeshiva.") There, a rabbi named Yehuda Kreuzer imparted the tenets of Kahanism: that the idea of coexistence with Israel's Arab population, which makes up twenty-one per cent of the country, is, as Ben-Gvir puts it, "babble" (Kahane: "there's no coexistence with cancer"); that Jewish women should be saved from Arab men (Kahane: "the incredible pollution of the sacred Jewish seed"); and that the "path" to solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an "exchange of populations." In other words: Palestinian expulsion from Greater Israel, territory that includes the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

While Ben-Gvir's old high-school classmates served in the Israel Defense Forces, he stayed at the yeshiva, absorbing extremist ideas. The Army had refused to conscript him. "There are only very few that we don't recruit," a former senior defense official told me. Why not Ben-Gvir? I asked. The official stared at me and said, "Give someone like *that* a weapon?"

DUET

I wanted to write a poem about delay
The white space between word and music
One night in Ohio a decade ago
Under a thunderstorm's bad blank verse

As I counted aloud between lightning and clap
A friend tackled me to the ground
To shut me up so he could hear it, the faint
Percussion I could just call thunder

If I wanted to be clear
I've tried to write this poem for years
But can't and won't, as every line
Falls faster than I can chase it, acid raindrop

Seeping into clover, garbage lyrics
Rising through its stem, poetry almost
As toxic as the city
Spraying my neighborhood down

As the new minister in charge of supervising Israel's police force, Ben-Gvir oversees a special-operations unit tasked with breaking up armed riots. For many Israelis, this is alarming. In one poll, forty-six per cent of respondents described him as "unworthy" of such a sensitive post. But Ben-Gvir's performance in last year's election was strong enough that Netanyahu granted him an expanded portfolio, which includes broad responsibility for "national security" and authority over border-patrol units in the West Bank—what the departing defense minister, Benny Gantz, called a "private army."

In 2021, Ben-Gvir returned to his old yeshiva for Independence Day. "Rabbi Kreuzer used to tell us students that one day we will reach positions of influence," he told a crowd of students. "For years, they delegitimatized us. They presented us as a bunch of haters, delusional, crazy. They distorted our positions, lied, and cheated. But slowly, over time, I saw how their attitude toward us changed. Maybe it's social media, which the press couldn't ignore. Suddenly, the Israeli people are exposed to us. . . . That, gentlemen, is amazing. Seculars, religious people, from the south and from the north, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, *haredim* who study, and *haredim* who work. Everywhere we went, we were wrapped in love."

To many observers, the growing acceptance of Ben-Gvir and his allies has more to do with a rise in populist outrage, and with the weakening of Israel's left wing. In 1977, after years of Labor rule, Likud came to power for the first time. Its Prime Minister, Menachem Begin, balanced ardent nationalism with respect for the judiciary, and a generation of conservative politicians followed his example—including Netanyahu, who joined Likud in 1988. But Netanyahu soon began to capitalize on increasing hostility to what he called the "élite": leftists, judges, academics, the press. After Rabin was killed, the peace accord that he had signed fell apart. As Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank grew, so did the incidence of Palestinian terror attacks, and an increasing number of centrists began to agree with the right-wing argument that "there is no partner for peace." With the rise of social media, the divisions only deepened, or at least became more visible: in one recent poll, twenty-two per cent of Israelis reported "hating" left-wing voters.

Ben-Gvir made an early career of stoking that kind of hatred. As a young Kahanist, he heckled stage actors known for leftist views, and handed out eggs to throw at marchers in gay-pride parades. For Purim, he would dress up as Baruch Goldstein, the Hebron mass murderer. In 2011, he invited the press to a public pool in Tel Aviv, where he appeared with forty Sudanese migrant workers. He bought them all tickets to enter the pool, and, while cameras rolled, handed them swimsuits. "I want all the pampered Tel Avivians to understand that if we give human rights to the Sudanese they will come *here*," he told reporters. Laughing, he called out to the migrants, in English, "Swim! Swim!"

He has been surprisingly frank about the purpose of his agitprop. "I use Kach summer camps and Rabin memorials . . . so that you would come and interview us," he told an Israeli media-watchdog publication in 2004. "The ideology itself you would never cover." Ben-Gvir has spent years cultivating journalists who report on the Jewish settlements, becoming what one described as their "pet extremist." He keeps a notebook with a running tally of reporters and the news items he feeds them. Chaim Levinson, a longtime journalist for *Haaretz*, told me, "When you are pressured by your

A pesticide to x the little messengers
So megafauna can continue
Planting real estate
Some sad poet named this chemical Duet

The friend who tackled me got sick
I visited as he received a drip of what I called
Quicksilver in an early draft, but it was just
Poison, I mean chemo, which saved his life

Duet on the apple blossom, duet in the core
Nights drift by to be surveilled
For words, as thunder splits the poem again
Half of it standing up and counting

Half of it tackled into clover
Pollen painted with our syntax
Pulses once then meets a cell
The rain is light years away

—*Daniel Poppick*

news desk to find a hilltop youth"—a nickname for the most hardened settlers—"you call Itamar." Last year, during a wave of deadly attacks, Ben-Gvir received more screen time on television than any other Knesset member, except for the Prime Minister.

Ben-Gvir "was always aware that it was all a kind of show," Mikhael Manekin, a veteran left-wing activist, said. Many Israeli liberals took this to mean that he was not an ideologue, Manekin added, "but the fact that he could joke with you didn't make him any less dangerous." When Manekin brought groups to tour Hebron, Ben-Gvir regularly showed up to confront them. "He would throw eggs, and curse, and yell at us," Manekin said. "And then, when the tour was all over, he would come up to me, smiling, and ask, 'So, when are you coming again?'"

This past December, I flew to Europe to meet Gilad Sade, who was raised by Tiran Pollak, Kahane's right-hand man, and served for years as one of Ben-Gvir's closest confidants. On the phone, before our meeting, Sade asked that I not reveal his exact location. He hasn't visited Israel in four years. "If I set foot in Jerusalem, they will break my bones," he said. "They," he explained, were former Kach members who now belong to other branches, including the anti-assimilation group Lehava, founded by Bentzi Gopstein, a Kahanist whom Ben-Gvir considers a "dear friend." (Gopstein declined to comment for this article.) Sade and I met in a basement café. He arrived looking like one of thousands of Israelis on their post-military trip around the world: shaggy curls, stubble, hiking clothes, a raffish earring. There were no indications of his former life—the large knitted kippah and long sidelocks that typify West Bank settlers.

I asked Sade how long he had known Ben-Gvir, who is a decade older than he is. "Since I can remember," he said. "He was like an older brother to me." Ben-Gvir was also his boss. He used to pay Sade and other teen-age boys about sixty dollars for a full night of spray-painting slogans. Sade said that he also encouraged such extracurricular "activities" as slashing car tires and smashing windshields. (Ben-Gvir denies this.) Most of the action took place in Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem and Hebron, but occasionally the boys rented a car and went from city to city on a binge of vandalism. Sade played me a recording in which a man who remains close to Ben-Gvir confirmed that Ben-Gvir had paid him, too, for graffiti when he was a teen-ager. "When we talked about money, Itamar used to say that all *he* had gotten in exchange for working for Bentzi was a shawarma," the man joked. (I am withholding his name because he was a minor at the time.)

Sade told me that, shortly after his bar mitzvah, Ben-Gvir sent him to spray Kach graffiti in a central intersection in Jerusalem. He was arrested and brought to a police interrogation room downtown. But when he gave the interrogator his name he was told, "There's no Gilad Pollak in the system." The interrogator thought that he was being uncoöperative, and started beating him. That was when Sade learned that Pollak was not his birth name. He had been adopted; his biological father was Palestinian. He discovered later that a fund-raising video had circulated within the Kach movement, showing him as a three-year-old, held by Rabbi Kahane. In the video, Kahane tells an American donor, "Nothing can prove the importance of what we're doing more than this little boy here. He could have been throwing rocks now at Jews, if we hadn't taken him and his mother away" from an Arab village. The donor—a Biblical archeologist named Vendyl Jones—can then be seen handing Kahane a check. Ben-Gvir showed the video at the annual Kahane memorial as recently as 2017.

The news about Sade's origins radicalized him even further, and he dropped out of school after the ninth grade. "Suddenly, you have twenty police files for graffiti, twenty police files for destruction of property," he said. Ben-Gvir, he added, took advantage of his eagerness.

In 2001, Hezbollah declared that it had a video documenting militants' capture of three Israeli soldiers a year earlier. The United Nations also had video relevant to the kidnapping, but initially refused to hand over an unedited version to Israel. Many on the Israeli right were furious. One night that summer, according to Sade, Ben-Gvir told him to get a ski mask, then drove him to a U.N. base in East Jerusalem. Ben-Gvir dropped him off around the corner and handed him a wire cutter, indicating where he could breach the fence without getting caught. "He sent me to fucking break into a U.N. base in Jerusalem and destroy their cars,” Sade told me. “I was fucking fourteen! I could have been killed!” (An aide to Ben-Gvir said that Sade fabricated this account out of personal animosity.) Inside the compound, Sade says, he punctured the tires of every car he could find and spray-painted slogans: “U.N. Out” and “Kahane Was Right.” He emerged to find Ben-Gvir waiting in his battered car, Hasidic music blasting from the speakers. “*Nu, nu, nu*?” he asked Sade, energized.

Kariv, the former Shin Bet official, could not confirm the break-in, but said that it sounded like “classic Itamar.” The Kahanists kept themselves at a distance while minors did the dirty work. They “were very aware that for us to interrogate a minor is much more complicated,” he explained. Yet Kariv sounded almost charmed by his former target. “I really appreciate where he came from, how hard he worked, and where he’s going,” he said. It wasn’t the only time I came upon this dissonance: people who spoke about Ben-Gvir’s overt racism were just as eager to talk about his charisma, basic niceness, and work ethic. (Years later, Kariv ran into Ben-Gvir at a television studio and congratulated him on the recent birth of his child. Ben-Gvir was taken aback. “You *shabakniks* know everything!” he said, using a common term for Shin Bet agents. Kariv pointed at his arm, where there was a wristband from the maternity ward. Both men laughed.)

Sade worries that Ben-Gvir’s superficial affability has distracted many Israelis from the danger that he presents: “From everything I know about Itamar and Kahanism, the goal is very simple—it’s to sow chaos.”

Sade, who left Kach more than a decade ago, now works as a reporter in places like Ukraine and Kosovo, filing stories for Israeli radio and for international news sites. In 2014, he uncovered some startling information. While appearing in a film about his life, “Best Unkept Secret,” he learned from his mother that the story of his birth featured in the fund-raising video had been a hoax. Sade’s father was not Palestinian, she told him. She was never “saved” from an Arab village. She had been a young single mother from a traditional home, and her mother had pressured her to seek help from the Kach movement. Once there, she had been coaxed into making a promotional video extolling the movement. “They exploited her, and they exploited me,” Sade told me. “Beyond being dangerous, these people are sophisticated. They’ve learned how to keep their own hands clean while leaving scorched earth under the feet of other people.”

Two weeks after the recent election, Netanyahu’s wife, Sara, invited the wives of the incoming coalition leaders (all of whom are men) to brunch at the Waldorf Astoria hotel in Jerusalem. A photograph of the event spread on social media. The Netanyahus are secular, but Sara’s guests were all religious, and had on long skirts and hair coverings—making them a distinctly unrepresentative sample of Israeli society, in which the ultra-Orthodox and national-religious sectors represent roughly thirty per cent of the populace. The image also went viral for another reason: Ben-Gvir’s wife, Ayala, was wearing a pistol in a holster that was visible over her skirt. Ayala, who is thirty-five, tweeted later that day, “[I] live in Hebron, mother of six sweet kids, travel through terrorism-ridden roads, married to the most threatened man in the country, and yes, I have a gun. Deal with it.”

There are, according to the Shin Bet, two things that tend to mellow extremists: military conscription and marriage. Ben-Gvir skipped conscription, and he married someone even more radical than he was. Ben-Gvir met Ayala Nimrodi around 2002, when he was twenty-six and she was fifteen. She was one of a handful of girls in the Kach movement, and she was a devoted adherent. “I happened to see a leaflet of Kahane, read it, and found many answers,” she told the news site Ynet. About a year after their meeting, she was arrested while occupying an illegal outpost in Hebron, and, when she refused to sign the terms of her release, Ben-Gvir showed up to cheer her on in court. They were married the next year. He told her, “I can’t promise you flowers and roses, but arrests, protests, and press.” In the Ynet interview, published a month after their wedding, Ayala was asked what she foresaw in the coming year. She replied, “I wish that, God willing, next year the land of Israel will all be ours. That we will continue to conquer it—and I mean the two banks of Jordan and south Lebanon. That we will get rid of the Arabs and deport them,

DIRTY MARTINIS 2023
Gross Martini
2 oz. vodka
1 oz. vermouth
1 tbsp. schmutz from hand vac
Greasy Martini
2 oz. gin
1 tbsp. vermouth
1 tsp. bacon fat
1 tsp. chicken fat
1 tsp. Crisco
Slobtini
1 oz. gin
1 oz. vodka
1 oz. vermouth
1 tbsp. couch crumbs
Garnish with dust bunny.

at long last. That whoever needs to get the death penalty there, will."

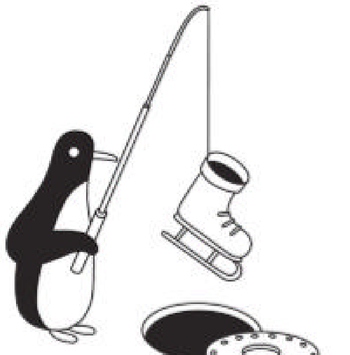
The Ben-Gvirs moved to Kiryat Arba, where they found a house at the settlement's disputed fringe: an area of old Hebron that Israel kept under military control. Some eight hundred Jewish settlers live there, guarded by more than six hundred soldiers, twenty-two checkpoints, and a barbed-wire fence. With a history of stabbings by Palestinians and drive-by shootings along the nearby highway, it is among the most dangerous places in the West Bank. Yet when Ben-Gvir drives around the neighborhood he keeps the windows open—"to make it clear to them who the landlord is," he once told an interviewer.

About two hundred and twenty thousand Palestinians live next door, in an area of Hebron controlled by the Palestinian Authority. But in Ben-Gvir's part of town Palestinians are forbidden to drive on many of the roads, and are barred from even walking on streets that are designated "sterile." When I visited the area recently, a poster at the entrance to the Cave of the Patriarchs announced, "It's Ben-Gvir Time." I was walking with a Palestinian activist named Issa Amro when an Israeli soldier warned him not to tread on the path reserved for Jews. Finally, the soldier allowed me to join Amro on the Palestinian side, which was unpaved and strewn with garbage. When people talk about Israel being an apartheid state, it's this kind of image that comes to mind. The reality is that Hebron is an outlier even by the standards of the Israeli occupation: it is the only Palestinian city with a Jewish settlement at its center. The concern among opponents of the new government is that Ben-Gvir and other ultranationalists will bring about what Amro calls the "Hebronization" of the country at large.

Amro is forty-two, a lifelong resident of Hebron. When he was a child, the city's main thoroughfare, al-Shuhada Street, was so bustling with shoppers that "my father had to hold my arm when we crossed." Now our footsteps echoed as we walked down the middle of the street. After the Goldstein massacre, in 1994, twelve hundred Palestinian-owned shops and market stands along al-Shuhada and the nearby streets were shuttered, by military order. For weeks afterward, the air reeked of fruit and vegetables left behind by the merchants. Things have been desolate ever since. Hostilities toward the Palestinians used to stem mostly from the settlers, Amro said. But since the last election Israeli soldiers and police officers have been increasingly aggressive. Ten days before my visit, two soldiers stopped a group of Israeli peace activists who were touring the area. One of the soldiers tackled an activist, punched him in the face, and cocked his firearm against the man's back. Amro was there, and filmed the incident. "Ben-Gvir will tidy up this place," the other soldier told him. "You're screwed." (Last week, a soldier confronted Amro as he talked with two foreign journalists, and ordered him to delete a video of their exchange. When Amro declined, the soldier grabbed him by the throat, threw him to the ground, and kicked him.)

In December, Ben-Gvir proposed a bill that would give soldiers immunity from prosecution. Not long before, he had waved a pistol at rioters in Jerusalem who hurled stones near him. He told soldiers at the scene, "If they throw stones, shoot them."

Netanyahu has little tolerance for lawmakers who are seen as insufficiently loyal, but Ben-Gvir treats him with deference. "Ben-Gvir admires him for real," Crombie, the former campaign strategist, told me. Last summer, Netanyahu summoned members of the hard right to an informal summit in Caesarea, where he lives. While four of Ben-Gvir's children splashed around in the pool, Netanyahu hashed out the terms of an alliance between Ben-Gvir and the leader of Religious Zionism, a settler named Bezalel Smotrich. The two men "were supposed to be the winning team of the right-of-the-right camp," Crombie said. Smotrich—who calls for the annexation of the West Bank and who once said that maternity wards in Israel should be segregated—attracted kippah-wearing Ashkenazi businessmen in the suburbs and the settlements. Ben-Gvir appealed to observant voters in Israel's development towns and mixed cities.



But the alliance was only a tactical one, and soon after the election the two parties split. The problem, reportedly, was ego: Smotrich demanded to be the alliance's official leader; Ben-Gvir felt condescended to. Crombie, who is friendly with both men, said that Smotrich had spent years positioning himself as the new élite of an educated, unapologetic religious-nationalist camp, and "didn't know what hit him" when Ben-Gvir's popularity began to rise. Smotrich represented the settler contingency, a highly organized electoral bloc. He felt, Crombie said, that Ben-Gvir dragged him to the fringes of society. (Imagine a union of the Tea Party and the Proud Boys.) According to data from the Israel Democracy Institute, collected shortly after the election, seventy-eight per cent of the alliance's voters said that they preferred Ben-Gvir to Smotrich. Netanyahu might have felt the same. Yossi Verter, a columnist for *Haaretz*, wrote in November that Netanyahu had less to worry about with Ben-Gvir, the "pyromaniac," than with Smotrich, the "megalomaniac." (A U.S. official said that the Biden Administration was "not engaging" with Ben-Gvir, hoping that Netanyahu could manage him.)

On a popular sketch-comedy show, Ben-Gvir is presented as an amiable klutz. "You have two options with extremists like him," Omri Marcus, a former writer for the show, told me. "Present him as a Teddy bear, or as a super-scary fanatic." The decision was clear: Ben-Gvir was the Teddy bear; Smotrich, the fanatic. Kariv, who tracked both men's activities during the early two-thousands, broadly agreed with that depiction. He posited an index of threats, borrowed from one maintained by the Shin Bet department that handles "non-Arab terrorism," in which such acts as damaging holy sites and mounting terror attacks on Palestinians are at the top of a scale from one to ten. By that measure, he said, Ben-Gvir was a three. Smotrich? A seven.

In 2005, following years of deadly attacks by Palestinian militants in Gaza, the government of Ariel Sharon, an otherwise hawkish Prime Minister, unilaterally pulled out of the Gaza Strip. For Jewish settlers, who believe in Israel's divine right to rule from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, the move was a calamity. Yet most responded to the evacuation of settlements with little violence. "The big debate then among the rabbis was whether to be removed like a sack of potatoes or like a bag of fish—kicking and squirming," Kariv said. Still, according to security officials, a small cell of hardcore settlers plotted acts of sedition. Smotrich allegedly belonged to that cell.

That August, Kariv led an operation in which special forces arrested Smotrich, along with four other suspects, in a house near Petah Tikva. "They had jerricans full of gasoline and burned oil from nearby garages," Kariv told me. He wouldn't specify what their plan had been, but Yitzhak Ilan, who had overseen the interrogation of Smotrich, said in 2019 that the group intended to torch cars along a Tel Aviv highway. (Smotrich, who declined to be interviewed for this article, denies the allegations; a spokesman said that he was arrested for organizing a demonstration and for blocking roads, and was released without charges. Ilan died in 2020.) In the end, the Shin Bet chose not to bring the case to court, for fear of exposing the agency's intelligence-gathering methods.

Meanwhile, Ben-Gvir tried to join the settlers of Gaza before the evacuation. But, according to Sade, who was part of his entourage for the trip, the settlers considered the Kahanists rabble-rousers and agitators. "They turned the sprinklers on us," he said. As the evacuation became imminent, the group, which included Ben-Gvir, his wife, and Bentzi Gopstein, took over an abandoned Jewish-owned hotel on the Gazan shore, and squatted there for several months. By the empty pool, they spray-painted "Death to the Arabs." In the coming weeks, they were joined by sympathizers, until there were a hundred and fifty squatters clustered around the hotel. Finally, the police raided the building, in a sprawling operation that involved six hundred officers. Ben-Gvir and Ayala were nowhere to be found, according to Sade. "They had gone shopping two hours earlier," he told me. It wasn't the only time that Ben-Gvir disappeared at a critical juncture, he said. In his view, this raised the possibility that Ben-Gvir had coöperated with the Shin Bet, and been tipped off about the raid.

For years, Ben-Gvir has denied rumors about collaborating with the Shin Bet. In a Knesset session in 1999, regarding the activities of Shin Bet agents, a right-wing legislator named Benny Elon read aloud from the commission's interview with Yigal Amir, Rabin's assassin, in which Amir mentions that Ben-Gvir was said to want to kill Rabin himself. Elon sought reassurance from the state that the Shin Bet was not deploying "provocateur agents."

After Rabin's murder, the Shin Bet revealed that it *had* deployed at least one agent among the far right: Avishai Raviv, who went by the code name Champagne. In 2019, the former defense minister Avigdor Liberman spoke in a radio interview about Ben-Gvir's party. Liberman, a right-winger who had emigrated from the former Soviet Union, mused, "Is Itamar Ben-Gvir what he presents himself to be, or a kind of new Champagne?" He concluded, "I'm not sure at all." Ben-Gvir promptly sued him, saying, "If I'm a Shabak agent, then Liberman's a K.G.B. agent." (Liberman claimed parliamentary immunity.)

I asked Kariv whether the rumors about Ben-Gvir's involvement with the Shin Bet had any merit. "Even off the record, I wouldn't tell you if it was or wasn't true," he said.

I mentioned Liberman's radio interview, and noted, "A defense minister insinuated this."

"And the wife of a Prime Minister," Kariv volunteered.

In 2020, while Naftali Bennett was serving as defense minister, his wife, Gilat, wrote on Facebook that her home had been broken into, and claimed that Jewish Power activists were responsible. Ben-Gvir sued her for libel. Four months later, she issued a detailed statement, in which she wrote, "Although Ben-Gvir presents a veneer of a right-wing extremist . . . he had served for many years as an agent for the Shin Bet, with the goal of gathering information on extreme right-wing activists and besmirching the rightist camp with provocations." Bennett did not disclose how she got that information. (Her family declined to comment for this article.) A month later, she and Ben-Gvir reached an out-of-court settlement, and she issued a formal apology, withdrawing her claims.

In 2015, Ben-Gvir, dressed in white, attended a wedding in Jerusalem for a young couple in his circle. After the ceremony, the music came on, and the men broke into an ecstatic dance, holding aloft not only the groom but also knives, assault rifles, and what appeared to be a Molotov cocktail, passing them from hand to hand. One of the guests then raised a picture of a baby, while another repeatedly stabbed the picture with a knife. The baby's name was Ali Dawabsheh.

Five months earlier, in the West Bank village of Duma, Jewish arsonists had firebombed a Palestinian home, burning baby Ali and his parents to death and critically injuring his four-year-old brother. Many at the wedding were friendly with the main arsonist, who had since been convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison. Ben-Gvir was his attorney. (Though Ben-Gvir can be seen smiling in a video from the wedding, he has maintained that he did not witness the display of weapons or the picture of the baby, which he called "stupidity.")

Before Ben-Gvir entered parliament, in 2021, he was Israel's leading attorney for suspected Jewish terrorists, settlers, and the far right. "Literally the devil's advocate," one legal observer told me. It's highly unusual in Israel for a man with fifty-odd indictments to practice law, and Ben-Gvir secured his license only after a two-year battle with the Israel Bar Association. Among those who resisted certifying him was Yori Geiron, then the chair of the bar. Geiron told me, "We would hope that the Bar Association would not populate its ranks with a person who has a criminal record, let alone one who has not been rehabilitated."

Yet even Ben-Gvir's critics concede that he is a talented litigator. Not long after he began practicing, he defended a Jewish settler charged with attacking a Palestinian man in Hebron. In court, Ben-Gvir asked the main witness for the prosecution to confirm that the person in the defendant's box was the suspect. The witness did—and then Ben-Gvir revealed that he had secretly swapped out his client for another man. The judge dismissed the case.

As his legal reputation grew, Ben-Gvir managed to distance himself from the innermost circle of extremism. Still, he didn't seem to soften his views. "My style is different," he reportedly said in 2016, "but ideologically I haven't changed."

"I don't recall Ben-Gvir ever arguing that it was wrong to hurt an innocent Palestinian," a man named Dov Morell told me. Morell, who is twenty-eight, was a guest at the "wedding of hate," as the event became known in Israel. It was he who had held up the picture of baby Ali. "I look back on it now and I'm horrified," he said when I met him recently on the campus of Tel Aviv University, where he is a law student. He was easy to spot amid a throng of young people: a thickset man with a ginger beard and a large knit skullcap.

After footage from the wedding leaked to the Israeli press, in 2015, Morell's parents sent him to stay with relatives in Wisconsin and New Jersey. There, he told me, he was exposed to libertarian and feminist Facebook groups, and slowly underwent a reckoning. He is now active with the left-wing political party Meretz. He sounded genuine in his attempt to recall his mind-set at the time. "One of my idols was Himmler," Morell told me. "Shocking, I know. But when you read his diaries you see a man grappling with the horrible things the Nazis were doing, yet still believing in the race theory. I really identified with that. I knew that what I was doing was harmful, but I thought that it was right." (Later, Morell learned that the diaries had been heavily rewritten.)

Last April, Morell was convicted of incitement to terrorism, as were six other wedding participants, including the groom. Though he is now "firmly in the left," as he put it, he still supports the movement to allow Jews to pray on the Temple Mount—which they are currently prohibited from doing, so that Muslims can worship at the al-Aqsa mosque, on the same site, without risking violent confrontations. As part of his religious activism, Morell came to know Ayala Ben-Gvir. He described her and Ben-Gvir as "amazing people who want to do terrible things." Those on the far right did not consider themselves extremists, Morell said: "When you believe that the world came with manufacturer's instructions, then you have to follow those instructions."

In the spring of 2021, a month after Ben-Gvir joined parliament, his allegiances as a politician were tested for the first time. In the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem, Palestinian residents were engaged in a five-decade legal battle to keep their homes, which sit on land that has been claimed by settlers. That May, Israel's Supreme Court was expected to issue a decisive ruling. Fearing expulsion, the residents erupted in nightly protests. After a week of unrest, Ben-Gvir showed up. He set up a desk for himself, planted the Israeli flag, and hung a massive sign that declared the spot "The Bureau of Knesset Member Ben-Gvir." The goal, he said, was to provide security for the handful of Jewish families living there. Instead, his presence provoked more violence. Palestinian residents threw chairs and rocks; Jewish residents responded in kind. That night, Ben-Gvir reportedly received a call from Netanyahu's office, warning, "If you don't leave, it could end with Hamas firing rockets on Israel."

Netanyahu was right. The clashes spilled into other parts of the Old City, including the grounds of the al-Aqsa mosque, which the Israeli police then raided. That night, Hamas launched rockets at Jerusalem. Israel sent devastating air strikes into Gaza. For Ben-Gvir's supporters, though, that was just the beginning. In messages on WhatsApp and Telegram, they promoted violent demonstrations in Israel's mixed towns. Ben-Gvir's ally Gopstein wrote, "Good Jews, we're arranging a protest in Bat Yam on the promenade at 5 P.M." That protest ended in the attempted lynching of an Arab man. The following day, Israel's police chief made a stunningly direct statement in a closed briefing: "The person responsible for this intifada is Itamar Ben-Gvir. . . . The police don't have the tools to deal with him."

The uprising brought to the fore a term that Ben-Gvir favors: *meshilut*, or governance. In interviews, he spoke about women who were afraid to walk down the streets, and railed against the torching of Jewish farms. While Netanyahu talked about the cost of living, Ben-Gvir concentrated on the anxieties and prejudices of Israelis who complained that their

"How's everybody doing tonight on a scale of zero to ten, with ten being the worst you've ever felt?"

p 12
MAYA + TONY
mark + theo
12

"It's a game where we roll the dice to see which destination wedding we should spend our savings on this year."

daughters were unable to visit the mall for fear of being harassed. Soon, citizens worried about law-and-order issues began to see him as a viable alternative to the establishment. His support spiked even in Israel's kibbutzim, long seen as leftist strongholds. The effect only grew as Palestinian militants carried out a surge of killings last year.

The campaign for *meshilut* worked. In a poll conducted by Israel's public broadcaster before the recent election, eighty-four per cent of voters said that they were "unconcerned" about Ben-Gvir's connection to Kahane. For his detractors on the left, however, "governance" was code for a majority wielding power in any way it saw fit. "His goal is the allocation of police resources by a nationalist index . . . and not by any index related to crime," Chaim Levinson wrote in *Haaretz*. According to Ben-Gvir, "a Bedouin man who rapes a young girl is several times worse than any other man who rapes a young girl," Levinson went on. "That is his whole theory."

Ben-Gvir's tough-on-crime persona was perhaps most resonant with the fans of his home soccer team, Beitar Jerusalem. Beitar has a long history of racism, and never had an Arab player until 2013, when the team brought two Muslim players from Chechnya. In response, two men reportedly connected to a fan club called La Familia set fire to the team's offices and trophy room. La Familia can be hard to distinguish from a gang. In 2016, an undercover police operation led to the arrest of fifty-two members, on suspicion of aggravated violence and operating a weapons trade.

Ben-Gvir's affiliation with the club dates back to his teen years, and he is often seen wearing the team's black-and-yellow scarf. Two weeks after the election, he went to a stadium in Jerusalem to watch Beitar play Bnei Sakhnin, a club from a northern Arab town. Encounters between the teams have such a violent history that for years their fans were banned from travelling to away games whenever they squared off. Now Ahmed Tibi, an Arab legislator, joined the fans in the Sakhnin stands. From his seat, he watched as TikTok videos pinged on his phone, showing Ben-Gvir in the east stand, reserved for diehard Beitarists. He was smiling for selfies with spectators, while a chant reverberated through the stadium: "Ahmed Tibi is dead!" Tibi has been a member of the Knesset for twenty-three years, and has served as its deputy chairman. In 2021, Ben-Gvir, in one of his first speeches before parliament, refused to acknowledge him with the customary "sir." Tibi called him to order.

Ben-Gvir shouted at him, "Who are you? You're a terrorist! You belong in the parliament of Syria, not here!"

"Rude! Bully! Get him out of here!" Tibi snapped back, as security guards tried to remove Ben-Gvir, who clung to the lectern.

In January, I met Tibi in his Knesset office. He spoke softly, but his voice rose when Ben-Gvir's name came up. "Cheap manipulator," he called him. He wished to make clear that his animosity didn't stem from religious differences. Tibi has what's known in Israeli politics as a "minority alliance" with ultra-Orthodox legislators. It's common to see political rivals in the Knesset exchange a friendly word in the cafeteria or in the halls. But with Ben-Gvir, Tibi said, "there's genuine hatred there."

Tibi's party had belonged to an alliance that had been in the opposition during the last government, which became known as the "change" coalition. His alliance helped precipitate the dissolution of the government and, by extension, sped the return of Netanyahu. I asked Tibi whether he felt partly responsible for the latest election results. He brushed off the question. "More Palestinians were killed under the 'change' government than under the previous government," he said. For Tibi, two issues were now of utmost concern. The first was Ben-Gvir's recent attempts to worsen the living conditions of Palestinians held in Israeli prisons. The second was the status of the al-Aqsa mosque. In 2000, Ariel Sharon, as the head of the opposition, entered the holy compound, helping to spark the second Palestinian intifada. Tibi was worried that a third intifada was not far off. If the new government attempted to change the fragile security arrangements that have governed the site since 1967, Tibi warned, "that can light up the region."

The new Israeli government was sworn in amid escalating violence, as a spate of attacks by Palestinians led to Israeli military raids across the occupied West Bank. The raids continued into the New Year, when Israeli forces killed nine Palestinians, who the Army said were militants, and an elderly woman inside the refugee camp of Jenin. Almog Cohen, the Jewish Power lawmaker, tweeted a flexed-biceps emoji and a note of encouragement: "Keep killing them."

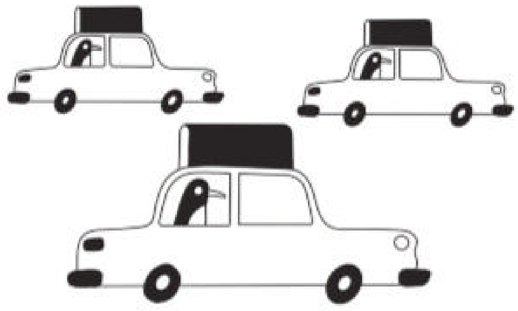
Soon afterward, a Palestinian gunman fatally shot seven Jewish Israelis outside a synagogue in Jerusalem, before police killed him. Ben-Gvir, newly installed as the national-security minister, arrived at the scene that night, wearing a white dress shirt and a blazer. "Deal with them, Itamar—we voted for you!" a man shouted through tears. Embracing witnesses, Ben-Gvir repeated three times that he had left his family's "Shabbat table" to be there. He seemed to want to be thanked. Without his usual scapegoats—Bennett, leftist ministers, Tibi, the liberal press, the U.N.—he also seemed at a loss for words.

Within twenty-four hours of the shooting, though, Ben-Gvir had settled on a culprit: Israel's attorney general. He told reporters that she had not acted swiftly enough to authorize sealing the home of the terrorist, which some security officials consider a deterrent to other potential attackers. Ayala Ben-Gvir wrote an op-ed for a news site for the settler community, complaining that, while her husband was "working harder than I ever thought possible," the government's legal advisers were "debating whether to drink Nespresso or espresso."

Ben-Gvir's predecessor, from the Labor Party, had worked to limit gun access. Ben-Gvir now said that he would expedite gun licenses for Israeli citizens. The previous coalition had also launched a five-year program that allocated roughly ten billion dollars to Israel's Arab communities, which had sustained years of government neglect. Ben-Gvir's party suggested that it would work to scrap the program, stating, without evidence, that a "vast sum" of the money had gone toward funding terrorism and crime. But Ben-Gvir offered little in the way of policy. Instead, he homed in, as is his habit, on symbols: he shut down Palestinian prisoners' pita ovens (which were in operation because bread-delivery vans had been used to smuggle in contraband), then posted a video on TikTok of himself enjoying a tray of fresh pita. After the synagogue shooting, he also ordered Palestinian prisoners to be put in solitary confinement. In response, militants in Gaza fired rockets into Israel with messages for the prisoners inscribed on them.

The overhaul of the judiciary only sharpened the country's divisions. It will, among other things, give the Knesset the ability to override Supreme Court decisions with a simple majority, and allow the government to control a committee that appoints judges. "The concern is unrestrained political majorities doing whatever they want," Adam Shinar, a professor of constitutional law at Reichman University, told me. "And, of course, who's going to be the victim? Probably Palestinians, women generally, asylum seekers, Israeli Palestinian citizens, L.G.B.T.Q., religious minorities, Reform, Conservative." In other words, Shinar said, groups without much of a lobby in the Knesset, whose only redress is through the court system. I mentioned that liberals had raised such concerns in the past, and asked whether it was possible that they were crying wolf. "What people forget about that parable is that the wolf does come in the end," Shinar said.

Increasingly, criticism comes from the right as well. Netanyahu's former attorney general, Avichai Mandelblit, said in an interview that the reform is "the most dangerous thing that can be." A poll released by Channel 12 showed that sixty-two per cent of Israelis wanted to stop or delay the reform, while only twenty-four per cent wanted it to move forward. In a speech on February 12th, the Israeli President, Isaac Herzog, warned, "We are on the verge of constitutional and social collapse." The following day, a hundred thousand protesters marched on the Knesset, chanting "Democracy!" Inside, a legislative committee controlled by the government passed the first of the overhaul's proposals.



Amid the unrest, a letter recently landed on Ben-Gvir's desk. Written by Raphael Morris, the Temple Mount activist, it pleaded with Ben-Gvir to allow Jews to ascend the holy site on Passover and offer a sacrificial lamb. The ritual, practiced in ancient times, is considered so extreme that only a few denominations permit it. Addressing Ben-Gvir, the letter notes that the ritual's "significance is well known to you from your past activism." Morris told me that he was unsure how Ben-Gvir would respond. Dov Morell, who had also advocated the issue, was adamant that Ben-Gvir, under pressure to conform to governmental norms, "will never authorize it."

Others in Israel subscribe to this view. Rino Zror, the journalist who covers the far right, pointed me to a briefing that Ben-Gvir gave after two bombs went off in Jerusalem, killing one person and injuring about twenty. Ben-Gvir, discussing the attacks, made a distinction between "little Israel" and "Judea and Samaria," the Biblical term for the West Bank. It was a glancing reference but, Zror said, one that the "old Ben-Gvir" wouldn't have made. Some Arab leaders, too, were willing to withhold judgment. "Maybe he will do things other people didn't do," Fayez Abu Sehiban, the mayor of Rahat, a predominantly Bedouin city in the Negev, said in a television interview after the election.

In Ben-Gvir's short time in office, though, he seems mostly to be chafing at the limits of his position. In a transition ceremony on New Year's Day, he referred to his predecessor as "undoubtedly the most failed minister." At midnight on January 3rd, he made a trip to the mikvah, or ritual bath. At seven the next morning, surrounded by security and police, he walked up the Temple Mount. His visit, which lasted thirteen minutes, was swiftly condemned by the Arab world, the U.S., and Turkey. The Palestinian Foreign Ministry called it a "flagrant assault." Netanyahu himself had issued a similar warning in 2020, saying that disturbing the status quo at the site could "unleash a billion Muslims on us." But Ben-Gvir maintained that he'd secured the Prime Minister's approval before making the trip. The Temple Mount is "open to everyone," he said in a video. "Muslims and Christians come here, and, yes, Jews, too." Staring into the camera while walking through the compound, he added, "In a government in which I'm a member, there will be no racist discrimination." ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

AFTER THE GOLD RUSH

How South Africa's abandoned mines filled with men risking their lives for a fortune.

BY KIMON DE GREEF

A few years ago, a mining company was considering reopening an old mine shaft in Welkom, a city in South Africa's interior. Welkom was once the center of the world's richest goldfields. There were close to fifty shafts in an area roughly the size of Brooklyn, but most of these mines had been shut down in the past three decades. Large deposits of gold remained, though the ore was of poor grade and situated at great depths, making it prohibitively expensive to mine on an industrial scale. The shafts in Welkom were among the deepest that had ever been sunk, plunging vertically for a mile or more and opening, at different levels, onto cavernous horizontal passages that narrowed toward the gold reefs: a labyrinthine network of tunnels far beneath the city.

Most of the surface infrastructure for this particular mine had been dismantled several years prior, but there was still a hole in the ground—a concrete cylinder roughly seven thousand feet deep. To assess the mine's condition, a team of specialists lowered a camera down the shaft with a winding machine designed for rescue missions. The footage shows a darkened tunnel, some thirty feet in diameter, with an internal frame of large steel girders. The camera descends at five feet per second. At around eight hundred feet, moving figures appear in the distance, travelling downward at almost the same speed. It is two men sliding down the girders. They have neither helmets nor ropes, and their forearms are protected by sawed-off gum boots. The camera continues its descent, leaving the men in darkness. Twisted around the horizontal beams below them—at sixteen hundred feet, at twenty-six hundred feet—are corpses: the remains of men who have fallen, or perhaps been thrown, to their deaths. The bottom third of the shaft is badly damaged, preventing the camera from going farther. If there are other bodies, they may never be found.

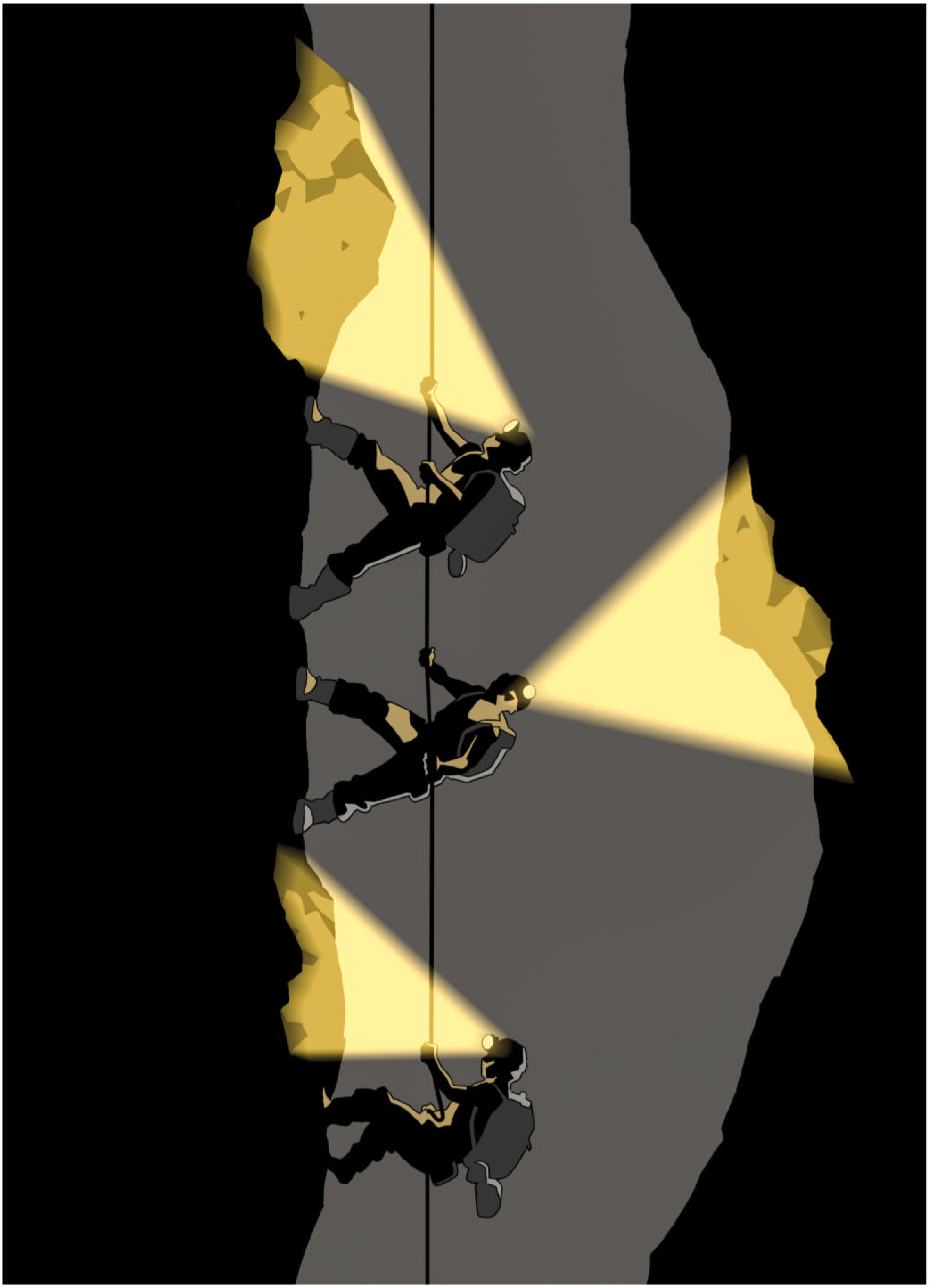
As Welkom's mining industry collapsed, in the nineteen-nineties, a dystopian criminal economy emerged in its place, with thousands of men entering the abandoned tunnels and using rudimentary tools to dig for the leftover ore. With few overhead costs or safety standards, these outlaw miners, in some cases, could strike it rich. Many others remained in poverty, or died underground. The miners became known as *zama-zamas*, a Zulu term that loosely translates to "take a chance." Most were immigrants from neighboring countries—Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho—that once sent millions of mine workers to South Africa, and whose economies were heavily dependent on mining wages. "You started seeing these new men in the townships," Pitso Tsibolane, a man who grew up in Welkom, explained to me. "They're not dressed like locals, don't talk like locals—they're just there. And then they vanish, and you know they're back underground."

Owing to the difficulty of entering the mines, *zama-zamas* often stayed underground for months, their existence illuminated by headlamps. Down below, temperatures can exceed a hundred degrees, with suffocating humidity. Rockfalls are common, and rescuers have encountered bodies crushed by boulders the size of cars. "I think they all go through hell," a doctor in Welkom, who has treated dozens of *zama-zamas*, told me. The men he saw had turned gray for lack of sunlight, their bodies were emaciated, and most of them had tuberculosis from inhaling dust in the unventilated tunnels. They were blinded for hours upon returning to the surface.

I recently met a *zama-zama* named Simon who once lived underground for two years. Born in a rural area of Zimbabwe, he arrived in Welkom in 2010. He started digging for gold at the surface, which was dusted with ore from the industry's heyday. There was gold beside the railway tracks that had once transported rock from the mines, gold among the foundations of torn-down processing plants, gold in the beds of ephemeral streams. But Simon was earning only around thirty-five dollars a day. He aspired to build a house and open a business. To get more gold, he would need to go underground.

In no other country in the world does illegal mining take place inside such colossal industrial shafts. In the past twenty years, *zama-zamas* have spread across South Africa's gold-mining areas, becoming a national crisis. Analysts have estimated that illegal mining accounts for around a tenth of South Africa's annual gold production, though mining companies, wary of alarming investors, tend to downplay the extent of the criminal trade. The operations underground are controlled by powerful syndicates, which then launder the gold into legal supply chains. The properties that have made gold useful as a store of value—notably the ease with which it can be melted down into new forms—also make it difficult to trace. A wedding band, a cell-phone circuit board, and an investment coin may all contain gold that was mined by *zama-zamas*.

Welkom, once an economic engine of the apartheid state, emerged as an early—and especially dire—hot spot for illegal mining. Since 2007, officials in the Free State province, where Welkom is situated, have recovered the bodies of more than seven hundred *zama-zamas*—but not all deaths are reported to the authorities, and many bodies remain belowground. "We call it the *zama* graveyard," a forensic officer said in



Some of the country's illegal miners, known as zama-zamas, have struck it rich. Many others have died underground.

ILLUSTRATION BY JONATHAN DJOB NKONDO

a 2017 news interview, following an underground explosion that killed more than forty people. In decommissioned mines, the ventilation systems no longer function, and harmful gases accumulate. At certain concentrations of methane, a mine becomes a bomb that can be detonated by the merest spark; even rocks knocking against each other can set off a blast. In Johannesburg, about a hundred and fifty miles northeast of Welkom, there are fears that illegal miners may cause gas pipelines to explode, including those beneath Africa's largest soccer stadium.

But perhaps the biggest dangers stem from the syndicates that have seized control of the illicit gold economy. Organized crime is rampant in South Africa—"an existential threat," according to a recent analysis from the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime—and gold-mining gangs are especially notorious. Armed militias war over turf, both at the surface and underground, carrying out raids and executions. Officials have discovered groups of corpses that have been bludgeoned with hammers or had their throats slit.

In Welkom, getting underground became impossible without paying protection fees to the criminal groups in charge. By 2015, just nine shafts were still operating, in spots where there was ore of sufficient grade to justify the expense of hauling it out. Some syndicates took advantage of these shafts, bribing employees to let the *zama-zamas* ride "the cage"—the transport elevator—and then walk to areas where mining had ceased. There were also dozens of abandoned shafts, including separate ventilation channels and ducts for subsurface cables. "Companies have difficulty plugging all the holes," a 2009 report on illegal mining noted. Each of these provided openings for *zama-zamas*. The miners climbed down ladders made of sticks and conveyor-belt rubber, which deteriorated over time and sometimes snapped. Or they were lowered into the darkness by teams of men, or behind vehicles that reversed slowly for a mile or farther, the ropes feeding over makeshift pulleys above the shaft. Sometimes the ropes would break, or a patrol would arrive, causing the men at the surface to let go. There were stories of syndicates deceiving miners, promising them a ride in the cage, only to force them to climb down the girders. Men who refused were thrown over the edge, with some victims taking around twenty seconds to hit the bottom.

In 2015, Simon entered the mines by paying a thousand dollars to a local syndicate boss, known as David One Eye, who allowed him to walk into the tunnels via an inclined shaft just south of Welkom. One Eye, a former *zama-zama* himself, had risen from obscurity to become one of the most fearsome figures in the region. He was powerfully built from lifting weights, and he had lost his left eye in a shooting.

The syndicate would charge Simon more than twice as much to exit the mines. He remained underground for almost a year, subsisting on food provided by One Eye's runners. He came away with too little money, so he went into the mines again, paying the same syndicate to lower him with a rope. He became accustomed to life underground: the heat, the dust, the darkness. He planned to remain there until he was no longer poor, but in the end he came out because he was starving.

Zama-zamas are a nightmarish late chapter in an industry that, more than any other, has shaped South Africa's history. Surface-level gold deposits were discovered in the area that became Johannesburg, sparking a gold rush in 1886. Twelve years later, the new South African mines were providing a quarter of the world's gold. (To date, the country has produced more than forty per cent of all the gold ever mined.)

The reefs that outcropped in Johannesburg extend deep underground, making up part of the Witwatersrand basin, a geological formation that stretches in an arc two hundred and fifty miles long. Extracting this gold required tremendous inputs of labor and capital. The Chamber of Mines once likened the basin to "a fat 1,200-page dictionary lying at an angle. The gold bearing reef would be thinner than a single page, and the amount of gold contained therein would hardly cover a couple of commas." Complicating matters further, this page had been "twisted and torn" by geological forces, leaving fragments "thrust between other leaves of the book."

In the nineteen-thirties, mining companies began prospecting in a different province—a sparsely populated area that would later be called the Free State. After the Second World War, one borehole produced a sample "so astonishing that financial editors refused to believe the press release," the historian Jade Davenport wrote, in "Digging Deep: A History of Mining in South Africa." The yield was more than five hundred times richer than a usual profitable return, propelling the international gold-shares market "into complete dementia." Land values in the nearest village increased more than two-hundredfold within a week.

But these new goldfields needed to be developed from scratch. There was no electricity or potable water. Vast maize fields spread across the grasslands. In 1947, a mining house called the Anglo American Corporation received permission to establish a new town, to be called Welkom—"welcome" in Afrikaans. The company's founder, Ernest Oppenheimer, who was the richest man in South Africa, tasked a British planner named William Backhouse with designing the settlement. Inspired by housing developments in England, Backhouse envisaged a garden city with satellite towns and ample greenbelts. There would be wide boulevards and circles to direct the flow of traffic. At the outset, Oppenheimer's son wrote, the region was "depressing in the extreme": flat and featureless, choked by frequent dust storms, with a single acacia tree, which was later designated a local monument. Eventually, the city was planted with more than a million trees.

Across South Africa, white mine workers were perpetually in demand, owing to laws that limited Black people to menial and labor-intensive jobs. To attract white workers and skilled technicians away from the Witwatersrand, the Anglo American Corporation built subsidized houses in Welkom, along with lavish recreational facilities such as cricket fields and a horse-riding club. By 1950, Welkom was growing at an average rate of two families per day. "Welkom is going to be the showplace of South Africa!" the national finance minister declared on an official visit.

The economic logic of the mines also demanded an inexhaustible supply of cheap Black labor. Restricted from unionizing until the late nineteen-seventies, Black mine workers performed gruelling and dangerous tasks, such as wielding heavy drills in cramped spaces and shovelling rock; tens of thousands died in accidents, and many more contracted lung diseases. To prevent competition among companies, which would have driven up wages, the Chamber of Mines operated as a central recruiting agency for Black workers from across Southern Africa; between 1910 and 1960, according to one estimate, five million mine workers travelled between South Africa and Mozambique alone. Expanding the labor pool helped the mining industry depress Black wages, which remained almost static for more than five decades. By 1969, the pay gap between white and Black workers had reached twenty to one.

In Welkom, a separate township was built for Black residents, set apart from the city by an industrial area and two mine dumps. One of the city planners' main goals, according to a history of Welkom from the nineteen-sixties, was to "prevent the outskirts of the town being marred by Bantu squatters." Named Thabong, or "Place of Joy," the township lay in the path of the dust from the mines. Segregated mining towns, which dated back to the nineteenth century, laid a foundation for South Africa's apartheid system, which was formally introduced the year after Welkom was founded. Every evening, a siren sounded at seven o'clock, announcing a curfew for Black people, who faced arrest if they stayed too late in the white part of town.

Oppenheimer had imagined Welkom as "a town of permanence and beauty." The cornerstone of the civic center, an imposing set of buildings laid out in the shape of a horseshoe, was a twenty-four-inch slab of gold-bearing reef. The council chambers were furnished in walnut, with crystal chandeliers imported from Vienna. There was a banquet hall and one of South Africa's finest theatres. In 1971, just three years after the complex was unveiled, a guidebook to South African architecture described the design as "perhaps too ambitious for a town which will, in all probability, have a limited life."

The crash came in 1989. The price of gold had fallen by nearly two-thirds from its peak, inflation was rising, and investors were wary of instability during South Africa's transition to democracy. (Nelson Mandela was freed the following year.) The rise of powerful unions, in the final years of apartheid, meant that it was no longer possible for the industry to pay Black workers "slave wages," as the former chairman of one large mining company told me. The Free State goldfields eventually laid off more than a hundred and fifty thousand mine workers, or eighty per cent of the workforce. The region was almost wholly reliant on mining, and Welkom's economy was especially undiversified. The town's sprawling urban design was also expensive to maintain, leading to a "death spiral," Lochner Marais, a professor of developmental studies at the University of the Free State, told me.

I first visited Welkom in late 2021. As I drove into the city, Google Maps announced that I had arrived, but around me it was dark. Then my headlights picked out a suburban home, followed by another. The entire neighborhood was without electricity. South Africa is in the midst of an energy crisis and experiences frequent scheduled power outages, but that was not the cause of this blackout. Rather, it was symptomatic of chronic local dysfunction, in a municipality ranked South Africa's second worst in a 2021 report on financial sustainability.

Welkom is surrounded by enormous flat-topped mine dumps that rise from the plains like mesas. The roads have been devoured by potholes. Several years ago, *zama-zamas* began breaking open wastewater pipes to process gold ore, which requires large volumes of water. They also attacked sewage plants, extracting gold from the sludge itself. Now untreated sewage flows in the streets. In addition, *zama-zamas* stripped copper cables from around town and within the mines. Cable theft became so rampant that Welkom experienced power failures several times per week.

As the gold-mining companies scaled back in South Africa, they left

"You're leaving already? But it's your apartment."

"And so Lucas and all his friends simply chose to ignore the metaverse, and in the end it went away . . ."

behind wasted landscapes and extensive subterranean workings, including railway lines and locomotives, intact winders and cages, and thousands of miles of copper cable. Many companies had devised protocols for withdrawing from depleted mines, but these were seldom followed; likewise, government regulations around mine closures were weakly enforced. "It's as if they just locked the door—'Now we're done,'" a mine security officer said of the companies. Shafts were often sold many times over, the constant changing of hands allowing companies to evade responsibility for rehabilitation. By the early two-thousands, according to authorities, South Africa had a large number of "derelict and ownerless" gold mines across the country, creating opportunities for illegal mining. Mining researchers in South Africa sometimes joke that the story of gold mining runs from AA to ZZ—from multinationals like Anglo American to *zama-zamas*.

Authorities first became aware of the burgeoning illegal-mining industry in the nineties. A fire broke out in one of Welkom's operational shafts, and a rescue team was called to extinguish it. The team discovered several dead bodies—the suspected victims of carbon-monoxide inhalation. The managers of the mine were not missing any workers, and the dead men were carrying no identification. They had been mining illegally in a disused area. "We weren't aware something like this could happen," a member of the rescue team recalled. A few years later, in 1999, police arrested twenty-eight *zama-zamas* in a nearby section of the tunnels. The men, laid-off mine workers, knew their way around like spelunkers in a cave network. An investigator involved in the arrest described them to me as "the forefathers of underground illegal mining in South Africa."

Even before there were *zama-zamas*, South Africa had a thriving black market for gold. In 1996, a security manager at one of the country's biggest mining houses prepared a report about gold theft, which he described as "the least reported and talked about criminal activity in South Africa." Back then, workers often pilfered gold from processing plants. One cleaner smuggled out gold-bearing material in a bucket of water; painters on the roof of a facility removed gold through the air vents. An employee was caught with gold inside his tobacco pipe; he didn't smoke, but had been using this method to steal for twenty years. Others used slingshots to shoot gold over security fences or flushed gold, wrapped in condoms, down the toilet, which they retrieved from nearby sewage plants. One official was observed, several times, leaving a facility with potted plants from his office; a security officer sampled the soil, which was rich in gold concentrate.

In Welkom, the main destination for stolen gold was in Thabong, at a dormitory known as G Hostel. During apartheid, hostels housed migrant workers as a way of preventing them from settling permanently in cities; these hostels have since become notorious for crime and violence. G Hostel had multiple entrances and was difficult to surveil. It functioned as an illicit smelting house, where teams of men would crush and wash the gold, then process it into ingots. Following the rise of *zama-zamas*, G Hostel developed into one of the largest gold-smuggling centers in the country. Eventually, around twenty-five hundred people were crammed into the compound, many of them undocumented immigrants. Police frequently conducted raids; in 1998, officers recovered more than ten metric tons of gold-bearing material. One dealer had been selling an average of a hundred ounces of gold per day.

During a raid in the early two-thousands, police arrested a *zama-zama* from Mozambique who gave his name as David Khombi. He was wearing a white vest, tattered cutoff jeans, and flip-flops. Khombi lived at the compound, where he supplemented his income by cutting hair, mending shoes, and tailoring Mozambican garments. Not long after the arrest, he was released and went underground, where he earned a small fortune, a former member of his inner circle told me. According to an expert on the illegal gold trade in the Free State, by 2008 Khombi had "started building his empire."

In South Africa, gold smuggling is

loosely organized into a pyramid structure. At the bottom are the miners, who sell to local buyers, who sell to regional buyers, who sell to national buyers; at the top are international gold dealers. The margins at each level are typically low—unlike many other illicit products, the market price of gold is public—and turning a profit requires substantial investments of capital, Marcena Hunter, an analyst who studies illicit gold flows, told me. To move upward, Khombi focussed his attention on a different commodity: food.

Sustaining thousands of *zama-zamas* underground is a complex and lucrative exercise in logistics. At first, many illegal miners in the Free State purchased food from legal mine workers, who sold their rations at inflated prices. But as the mines laid people off, and the number of *zama-zamas* grew, the syndicates began providing food directly. A new economy developed—one that could be even more profitable than gold. Men underground had little bargaining power, and markups on food usually ranged from five hundred to a thousand per cent. A loaf of bread that cost less than ten rand at the surface sold for a hundred rand down below. Fixed prices were set for peanuts, tinned fish, powdered milk, Morvite (a high-energy sorghum porridge originally developed for feeding mine workers), and biltong, a South African jerky.

Zama-zamas could also purchase such items as cigarettes, marijuana, washing powder, toothpaste, batteries, and headlamps. They paid with the cash they made from selling gold; when they were flush, some miners celebrated with buckets of KFC, which were available underground for upward of a thousand rand. Around a decade ago, one KFC in Welkom was supplying so much food to gold syndicates that customers started avoiding it: orders took forever, items on the menu ran out, and meals were often undercooked. Police contacted the owner, who agreed to notify them whenever large orders came in. On one occasion, officers observed a truck picking up eighty buckets of chicken.

Khombi began paying men to shop at wholesalers, package the goods in layers of cardboard and bubble wrap, and then drop the fortified parcels down the shafts. (They often used ventilation channels, the powerful updrafts slowing the rate at which the supplies fell.) As his earnings increased, Khombi began buying gold from *zama-zamas*, profiting doubly from their labor. He built a large house in Thabong, where he developed a reputation for sharing his wealth—“like a philanthropist,” one community activist told me. During his rise to prominence, he also made enemies. He was later shot in the face, but survived, and became known as David One Eye.

One afternoon, I met a former *zama-zama* whom I’ll refer to as Jonathan. He spent a year in the tunnels around 2013. “We were thousands underground,” he recalled. The men worked bare-chested because of the heat, and they slept on makeshift bunks. Khombi controlled the supply of food, and there were deliveries of beer and meat—“everything,” Jonathan said. For nearly three months, Jonathan was dependent on a group of more experienced miners, who guided him through the tunnels and shared their supplies. Finding and extracting gold required considerable expertise, and some *zama-zamas* were able to read the rock like mineralogists. But there were also other jobs underground, and Jonathan found work as a welder, producing small mills, known as *pendukas*, for crushing ore. The other miners paid him in gold.

Access to the tunnels was controlled, increasingly, by armed gangs from Lesotho, to whom Khombi paid protection fees. Known as the Marashea, or “Russians,” these gangs traced their origins to mining compounds on the Witwatersrand, where Basotho laborers banded together in the nineteen-forties. (Their name was inspired by the Russian Army, whose members were “understood to have been fierce and successful fighters,” the historian Gary Kynoch wrote, in “We Are Fighting the World: A History of the Marashea Gangs in South Africa, 1947–1999.”) The Marashea dressed in gum boots, balaclavas, and traditional woollen blankets, worn clasped beneath the chin. Following the rise of illegal mining, they muscled in on the shafts. They carried weapons—assault rifles, Uzis, shotguns—and fought viciously over abandoned mines. Accordion players affiliated with the gangs wrote songs taunting their enemies, like drill rappers with nineteenth-century instruments.

Working with factions of the Marashea, Khombi seized control of large areas of the Free State goldfields. He structured his illicit business almost like a mine, with separate divisions for food, gold, and security. As his wealth grew, he and his wife acquired extravagant tastes. They built a second home in Thabong, so ornate that it drew comparisons to a compound built by Jacob Zuma, South Africa’s notoriously corrupt former President. On Instagram, Khombi posted photographs of himself wearing Italian suits and flexing his biceps in tight-fitting tees. (One caption: “Everyone talks about mother’s love but no one talks about a father’s sacrifice.”) He bought a fleet of cars, including a customized Range Rover worth an estimated quarter-million dollars, and opened a pair of night clubs in Thabong, rising above a sea of metal shacks. His wife, who was from an extremely poor family, began dressing in Gucci and Balenciaga, and often flew to Johannesburg for shopping trips.

In the nineteen-fifties, according to Welkom records, there were white women who “made a point of flying regularly to Johannesburg for a day’s shopping.” Their husbands, who worked in the mines, were “absolutely fearless, accepting hazard and risk, with a terrific driving force to earn the maximum possible amount of money.” The structure of the company town guaranteed that, for its white residents, there was plenty of money in circulation. Khombi rose to the top of a new hierarchy, one that enriched a different set of bosses but was similarly based on Black labor.

Today, a row of grand banks stands mostly shuttered, a putt-putt course has been taken over by drug dealers, and the public gardens are strewn with trash and stripped cables. This past November, a clock tower outside the civic center, considered one of Welkom’s landmarks, displayed a different incorrect time on each of its three faces, with a faded banner for an event in 2018. The commercial district has retreated into the Goldfields Mall, which was built in the nineteen-eighties; it has a giant statue of a rhinoceros out front. (In December, they gave the statue a Christmas hat.)

I met a former police reservist there one morning. He asked to be identified as Charles. For around nine years, he was on Khombi's payroll, selling him gold confiscated from rival dealers, protecting him, and escorting *zama-zamas* to the mines. Charles used the money to buy a new car and pay lobola, a bride-price customary in many Southern African cultures.

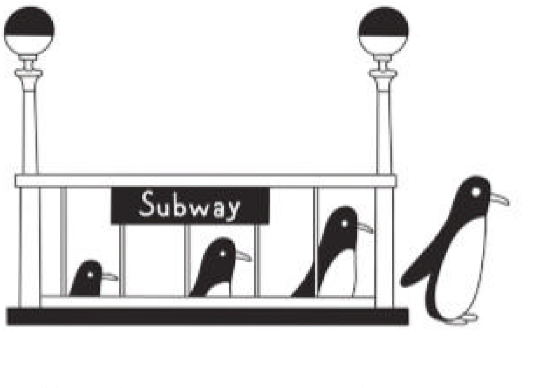
Corruption is a corrosive force in South Africa. In Welkom, which has not received a clean financial audit since 2000, tens of millions of dollars in government funds have gone missing. Even in this context, Khombi's influence was legendary. Charles estimated that seventy per cent of the local police force had been in the kingpin's pocket; I took this to be an exaggeration, until a senior detective who works on illegal-mining cases corroborated the figure, laughing bitterly.

But Khombi, like any capable mafia don, was also propping up core services of the city. He repaired dirt roads in Thabong and donated supplies to local schools. In 2015, the national electricity utility threatened to cut off power to Welkom and its surrounding towns unless the municipality began paying off an outstanding bill of around thirty million dollars. Rumors circulated that Khombi had made a cash payment to avert the power cuts.

Corruption was just as pervasive in the operational mines. Smuggling in *zama-zamas* could cost as much as forty-five hundred dollars per person, according to the illegal-gold-mining expert. The process could require bribing up to seven employees at once, from security guards to cage operators; this meant that mine employees could earn many times their regular salaries through bribery. Some were caught with bread loaves strapped to their bellies and batteries hidden inside their lunchboxes, which they planned to sell to *zama-zamas*. They also served as couriers, ferrying gold and cash.

Mine workers who couldn't be paid off were targeted by the syndicates. In 2017, a Welkom mine manager known for his tough stance against *zama-zamas* was murdered. Two months later, a mine security officer was shot thirteen times on his way to work. The following year, an administrator was stabbed ten times at home while his wife and children were in another room, and the wife of a plant manager was kidnapped for a ransom of one bar of gold.

Today, after a series of acquisitions and mergers, a single company, Harmony, owns the mines around Welkom. Harmony specializes in exploiting marginal deposits at so-called mature mines, which has allowed it to prosper during the twilight years of South Africa's gold industry. According to a company presentation that I obtained, Harmony has spent roughly a hundred million dollars on security measures between 2012 and 2019, including outfitting its mines with biometric authentication systems. They have also demolished several dozen disused shafts. Company records show that more than sixteen thousand *zama-zamas* have been arrested since 2007; in addition, more than two thousand employees and contractors have been arrested under suspicion of taking bribes or facilitating illegal mining. But these arrests were mostly at the bottom of the illegal-mining hierarchy, and had little lasting impact.



One day, I met a team of security officers who patrolled some of the mines beneath Welkom; several of them had worked in Afghanistan and Iraq, and told me that the mines were more dangerous. The officers recounted coming across explosives the size of soccer balls, stuffed with bolts and other shrapnel. In shoot-outs, bullets ricocheted off the mine walls. "It's tunnel warfare," a member of the team said.

But in town, especially among poorer residents, there was a sense that this violence was peripheral to a trade that sustained a large number of people. Money from *zama-zamas* spilled over into the general economy, from food wholesalers to car dealerships. "The economy of Welkom is through *zama-zamas*," Charles, the former police reservist, told me. "Now Welkom is poor because of one man." A few years ago, Khombi began ordering brazen hits on his rivals, becoming the focal point of a wider clampdown on illegal mining. "He took it too far," Charles said. "He ruined it for everyone."

The first known murder linked to Khombi was that of Eric Vilakazi, another syndicate leader who had been delivering food underground. In 2016, Vilakazi was shot dead in front of his home while holding his young child in his arms. (The child survived.) Afterward, Khombi visited Vilakazi's family to share his condolences and to offer financial support for the funeral. "If he killed you, he'll go see the wife the next day," the former member of Khombi's inner circle, who accompanied him on the visit, told me. An aspiring kingpin named Nico Rasethuntsha attempted to take over the area where Vilakazi had been operating, but a few months later he, too, was assassinated.

In December, 2017, Thapelo Talla, an associate of Khombi's who had tried to break away, was gunned down outside a party for Khombi's wedding anniversary. The following month, a syndicate boss known as Majozi disappeared, along with a policeman who had worked with him; Majozi's wife was found dead at their home, and his burned-out BMW was found near an abandoned hostel. (Informants said afterward that Majozi and the policeman were tossed down a shaft by Khombi's henchmen.) Later, a gold smuggler named Charles Sithole was murdered after receiving death threats from Khombi, and a pastor in Thabong who had sold a house to Khombi,

ZELDA FITZGERALD

It’s true I hate the stories about the other women,
but I love the description of their daily lives, like the scene
with twelve raspberry cakes in a French café,
or the drunkard asking for the way. A bottle of whiskey
on a heavy walnut table, my husband’s hands on a glass.
No one’s muses are believable, said the painter
whom I loved for twelve weeks and who would
rarely touch me. To him, the female body
was a plant: it needed to be tended and spoken
to, but too much warmth would spoil the matter.
In his paintings that I like best, women wander through cities
and notice objects. Lanterns. Hats they can’t
afford. Little glasses of Pernod. I loved him
to hurt the other one, whom I loved more. And so,
most of my life, it passes like this: light touching
my skin, lying on the floor among my diaries, writing of him—
What did Proust say, months before he passed away?
I have great news. Last night, I wrote “The End,”
so now I can die. Oh! Had I known the boredom that my talents
had in store for me, I would still have asked for them.

—*Aria Aber*

and was requesting the full payment, was shot and killed.

The incident that led to Khombi’s undoing took place in 2017, at a cemetery outside Welkom. Like the towns around it, the cemetery was running to ruin—a metal sign over the entrance, along with some headstones, had been stolen. The graves had been racially segregated during apartheid, and headstones of white people remained clustered at one end. Khombi suspected one of his lieutenants of stealing money and gave orders for him to be shot in the cemetery. The body was discovered the next morning, lying beside an abandoned vehicle.

One of Khombi’s men, who was at the cemetery that night, was also working as an informant for the police, and Khombi was eventually charged with murder. (The first investigating officer assigned to the case was found guilty of lying under oath to protect him.) Khombi was held at a local jail, where wardens delivered KFC to his cell. “They were treating him like a king,” the expert on the illegal gold trade told me. A man who was charged alongside Khombi was thought to have been poisoned—an effort, officials believe, to prevent him from testifying—and had to be brought to court in a wheelchair.

The trial began in late 2019. Khombi, who had been released on bail, showed up in designer suits every day. He presented himself as a businessman with philanthropic interests, alleging that he was a victim of a conspiracy. The judge was unpersuaded. “The entire murder has the hallmark of a hit,” he declared, sentencing Khombi to life in prison. Khombi’s legal team is petitioning the courts to overturn this decision, but he also faces other charges: for the 2017 murder of Talla, and for identity fraud. (Police discovered two South African I.D.s in his home, with different names, both featuring his photograph.)

I returned to Welkom to attend the trials for both cases. Last September, driving from Johannesburg along the arc of the Witwatersrand basin, I passed through a series of blighted mining towns, now home to armies of *zama-zamas*. It was the windy season, and clouds of dust blew from the mine dumps. The waste from South African gold mines is rich in uranium, and in the nineteen-forties the U.S. and British governments initiated a top-secret program to reprocess the material for the development of nuclear weapons. But a large number of dumps remain, with dangerously high levels of radioactivity. In Welkom, the dust blows into houses and schools. Some residential areas have radioactivity readings comparable to those of Chernobyl.

The magistrate’s court is in the city center—a modernist building with arresting red metal finishes where thousands of *zama-zamas* have been prosecuted. In the halls, there are posters that read “STOP ILLEGAL MINING,” with images of gold in its different forms, from ore concentrate to refined bars. Outside the courtroom, on the first day of Khombi’s trial for identity fraud, a garrulous man wearing a kufi hat with a red feather introduced himself to me as Khombi’s half brother, although I later found out that he was a more distant relative. Without my asking, he said of Khombi, “He worked with gold, I won’t deny it. But he wasn’t a killer.” The problem, he told me, was the gangs from Lesotho: “He had to work with them.” Khombi had become rich from the gold trade, and also arrogant, he added. “But the cops were in his circle. Who’s the real mafia here?”

Inside, Khombi was in shackles, laughing with the wardens. He wore a black sweatshirt pulled tight over his muscles, and his voice boomed across the courtroom. He had already begun serving his murder sentence, and in prison he was organizing prayer meetings for the inmates. (Khombi is a member of an Apostolic church.) Before the trial could begin, his defense lawyer secured a postponement, and Khombi was escorted back to the cells.

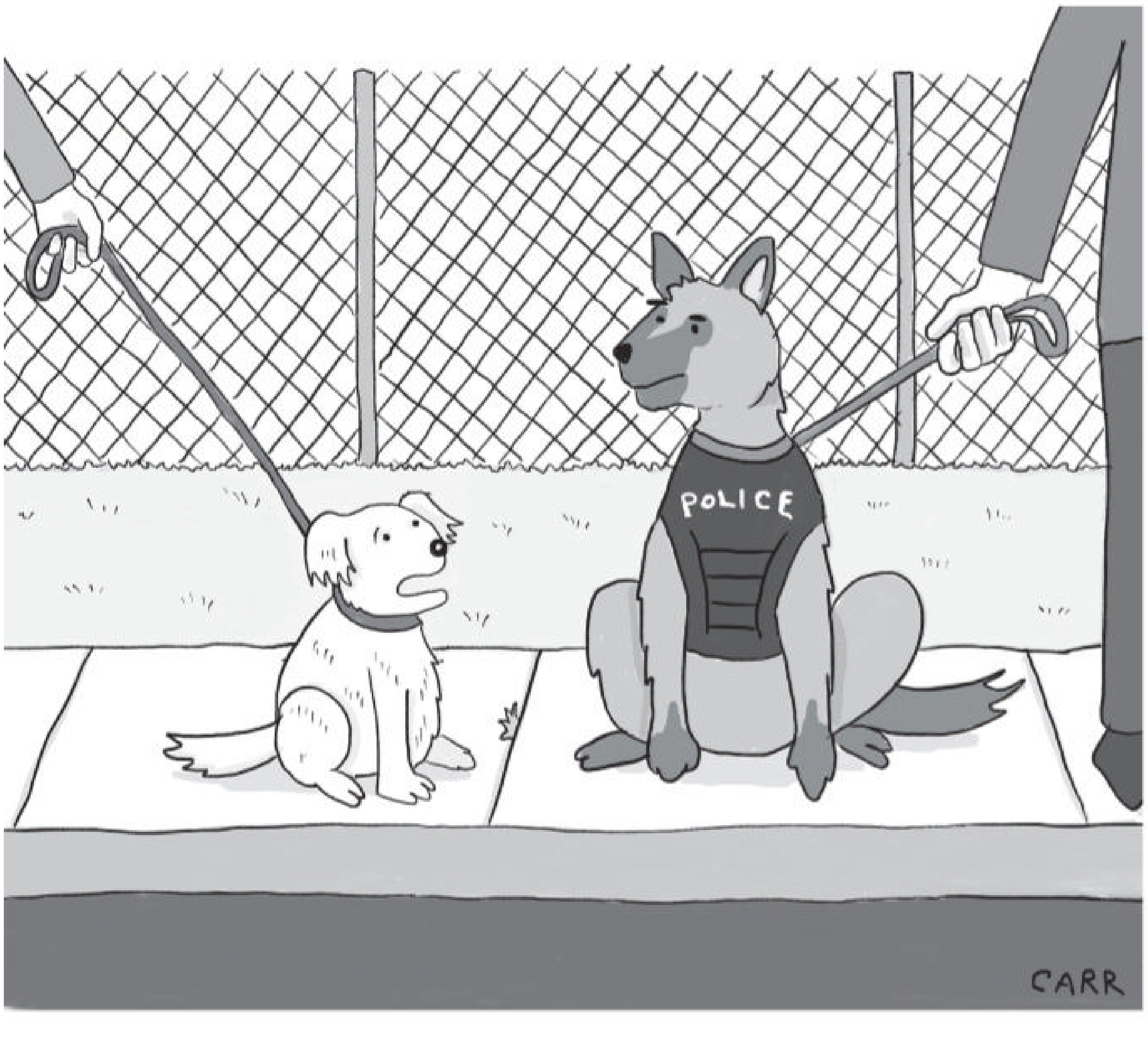
I was able to speak to Khombi two months later, at the trial for Talla’s murder. Our conversations took place as he was led in and out of the courtroom, with his wardens repeatedly shooing me away. When I introduced myself, Khombi greeted me like a politician and gave me a warm handshake, as if he had been expecting me. He denied being a gold dealer, but said that he knew many people involved in the trade. “From what I have observed,” he said, “it involves a lot of people—police, judges, magistrates, security. It’s too dangerous to talk about.” He also told me, smiling, that he had paid close to a million dollars for the municipal electricity bill, and made separate payments for water. “I’m not what all these people say about me,” he said. “I don’t sit and plot to kill people.”

One day in Welkom, I got lunch with Khombi’s legal adviser, a smooth-talking former attorney named Fusi Macheka, who was disbarred in 2011. Macheka is a lay pastor, and he blessed our food when it arrived. He told me that he had known Khombi since around 2007, claiming to have successfully defended him in an illegal-gold-dealing case at the time. “Ultimately he became my man,” Macheka said. “He calls me brother.”

While we were talking, a man with heavily scarred forearms arrived and sat down without greeting me. Macheka introduced him as Khombi’s lieutenant. “He’s a shock absorber for him,” Macheka explained. The lieutenant, who gave his name as Sekonyela, was wearing a yellow golf shirt that identified him as the chairman of the Stingy Men Association of Free State, which he was reluctant to elaborate on. He had known Khombi for close to three decades, working his way up from being Khombi’s gardener to being his right-hand man. Through the years, he said, Khombi had paid for his wedding, including lobola and a honeymoon to Cape Town, and had given him multiple cars and motorbikes.

A few days later, Sekonyela arrived on one of those bikes, a Yamaha with a top speed of around a hundred and thirty miles per hour, to accompany Macheka and me on a tour of Khombi’s properties. We began at Khombi’s newest home, purchased from the pastor who was murdered. It featured the only residential swimming pool in Thabong, Sekonyela said. A former chief interpreter of the Welkom magistrate’s court happened to be passing by, and he informed me, misleadingly, that Khombi was “never ever in court for one murder.” He added that Khombi had donated soccer balls and kits for two youth teams he managed. “He was for the people,” the interpreter said.

Many people in the township shared stories of Khombi’s generosity and lamented his absence. “He wanted people’s stomachs to be full,” one community leader said. I heard about Khombi paying for children to go to school and providing cattle to slaughter at funerals. Multiple officials I spoke with believe that Khombi remains active in the illicit gold trade, organizing deals from inside prison, but I got the sense that his power had waned. Weeds flourished outside his properties, and his night clubs were often closed. Khombi’s incarceration had left room for other syndicates to grow, but nobody had inherited his mantle as Thabong’s benefactor. Macheka wanted me to appreciate his client’s importance in the community, but he was evasive when I asked if Khombi had been involved in gold smuggling. “I can’t say that with certainty,” Macheka replied. “According to my instructions, he was a hard worker.” Macheka also mentioned that Khombi had given him two cars. “He knew about this secret of giving,” Macheka had said, a few days earlier. “In terms of my Biblical understanding, you give one cent, you get a hundredfold. Maybe that was his secret.”



“Let’s say I’ve been practicing therapy without a license. How much time would I be looking at?”

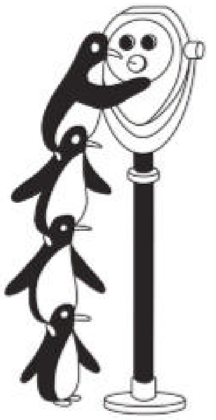
Khombi’s murder conviction coincided with a joint operation, by various police agencies and a private-security firm contracted by Harmony, to bring illegal mining in the Free State under control. The project is called Knock Out, and its logo is a clenched fist. To circumvent the corruption in Welkom, fifty police officers were brought in from the city of Bloemfontein, a hundred miles away. The operation has recorded more than five thousand arrests; among those taken into custody were seventy-seven mine employees, forty-eight security officers, and four members of the military. Investigators opened cases against more than a dozen police officers. Some cops, in the face of increased scrutiny, preëmptively quit the force.

Central to the operation was cutting off food supplies for *zama-zamas* underground. Investigators raided locations where food was being packed. In parallel, some of the operational mines instituted food bans for employees, and Harmony closed off more entrances to the tunnels. At first, contractors capped old shafts with slabs of concrete, but *zama-zamas* dug underneath and broke these open, so the contractors began filling the shafts with rubble, sealing them completely. The company spent two years on one shaft, pumping in seemingly endless volumes of concrete; investigators later discovered that, inside the tunnels, *zama-zamas* had been removing the slurry before it could set. On another occasion, a syndicate sent three excavators to reopen a shaft. Security officers who intervened were shot at and almost run over by one of the machines. (The driver was later convicted of attempted murder.) To regain control of the site, officials sent in helicopters and erected a perimeter of sandbags—"like an army camp," one member of the operation told me.

Sealing vertical shafts restricts access from the surface, but it does not close the entire tunnel network, and thousands of *zama-zamas* remained below Welkom, their food supplies dwindling. Many still owed money to the syndicates that had put them underground. They didn't want to exit. How else were they going to pay? Jonathan, the former *zama-zama*, estimated that hundreds had died of starvation, including several of his friends. "The saddest part of it, the most painful, is that you can't bury them," he said.

Burials are of supreme importance in many Southern African cultures. In the past, when *zama-zamas* died underground, their bodies would typically be carried, shrouded in plastic, to the nearest functioning shaft and left for mine employees to discover. Affixed to the corpses were labels with a contact number and a name. The bodies were repatriated to neighboring countries or buried in the Free State. But now so many men were dying that it was impossible to collect them all. Simon, the *zama-zama* from Zimbabwe, told me that during 2017 and 2018 more than a hundred men died on just two levels of the mine he was living in. Using blankets as stretchers, he and some other *zama-zamas* had carried out at least eight bodies, one at a time; each journey had lasted around twelve hours. "The first time I see a dead body, I'm scared," he recalled. As conditions worsened underground—at one point, Simon went fourteen days without food—he stopped caring, and would sit on the bodies to rest.

Operation Knock Out forced *zama-zamas* to go elsewhere in search of gold. Many left for Orkney, a mining town eighty miles north. One weekend in 2021, according to the South African Police Service, more than five hundred *zama-zamas* exited the tunnels in Orkney after their food and water supplies were cut off; days later, hundreds of men attempted to force their way back inside, culminating in a shoot-out with officials that left six dead. When I visited, a security officer took me to an abandoned shaft nearby that had been capped with concrete but blown open by *zama-zamas*. Ropes were strung over the mouth of the hole, which was more than a mile deep. The shaft was no longer ventilated, and gusts of hot vapor blew up from the tunnels. Marashean snipers were observing us from a mine dump; that night, more *zama-zamas* would lower themselves over the shaft's edge.



In Welkom, the drop in illegal mining dealt yet another blow to an already ravaged economy. "Most of our illegal miners are our businesspeople," Rose Nkhasi, the president of the Free State Goldfields Chamber of Business at the time, told me. I met her in a boardroom with framed portraits of her predecessors, almost all of whom were white men. Nkhasi, who is Black, acknowledged the violence and corruption associated with gold smuggling, but she was frank about its role in sustaining Welkom. She singled out Khombi—"He's huge in the township, like the biggest mafia"—for his economic impact. "He employs a lot of people," she said. "You can feel his money."

Nkhasi owns a property with a car wash, a mechanical workshop, and a restaurant. In earlier years, she told me, *zama-zamas* would bring their cars in for repairs and order food, paying with two-hundred-rand bills—the largest denomination in South Africa—and declining change. Police vehicles cruised by to collect payments from Khombi's henchmen. Nkhasi also has an independent town-planning practice, where syndicate leaders often brought her rezoning applications to build rental units. "They are the ones developing this town," Nkhasi told me.

Investigators believe that there are still around two hundred illegal miners underground, roaming the passages beneath Welkom; they are adamant that, eventually, many more will return. The problems are deeply embedded. South Africa, once the world's largest gold producer by far, now ranks a distant tenth. The country is still home to some of the richest gold deposits in the world, and there are many companies that would be interested in digging for them. But there is an increasingly strained relationship between the state and the mining sector, with ever-shifting policies—including a requirement that a large number of shares go to historically disadvantaged South Africans—and the spectre of corruption acting as deterrents to investment. Margins on gold mines are thin, and increasing security costs, combined with gold losses to *zama-zamas*, can "eliminate most of the profits," the former mining chairman told me. "Nobody wants to go into the casino." The gold-mining industry has come to symbolize the dispossession and exploitation that have shaped South Africa, today the country with the highest income inequality in the world.

One evening, before sunset, I drove out to an old shaft on the southern edge of Welkom. Sunk in the early nineteen-fifties, it once led to one of South Africa's richest mines, producing thousands of tons of ore per day. The shaft was filled a few years ago, and all that remains is a low mound in the middle of a grassy field. Nearby, at a venue called Diggers Inn, where Khombi held his wedding, an end-of-year celebration was kicking off for the graduates of Welkom High School. A crowd had gathered to cheer for the teen-agers, many of whom had hired chauffeured cars. Not two thousand feet away, at the opposite end of the shaft, some men were at work with picks and shovels, scraping gold from the earth. ♦

THE LAST GROWNUP • ALLEGRA GOODMAN

ILLUSTRATION BY GEOFF McFETRIDGE

She heard their footsteps on the stairs. Water running in their bathroom. She sensed her daughters everywhere, but it was just her imagination. They were gone. Of course, they would come back. They were safe, and it was just till Sunday. It wasn't death—it only felt like that. Her friends said, Now you can rest! You can think! You can work out! Theoretically, she could have done these things. She could have been thinking and going to the gym and resting, but when the girls left with their father Debra sat on the couch and cried. Which was fine. Crying was good. Divorce was hard! All she had to do was call, and her sister Becca would come right over, but Debra didn't want sympathy, so no one saw her tears except the dog.

Max was a Samoyed, and pure of heart. If anyone was injured, he came running. When Lily fell head first from her bike, Max had rushed to lick her better. But where was Debra hurt? She couldn't explain, so she buried her face in his white fur.

Eventually, Debra got up and preheated the oven to four-twenty-five. She poured a bag of frozen shoestring fries onto a cookie sheet. A sprinkle of salt, a dollop of ketchup, and that was dinner, which she ate right on the couch. It wasn't good for her, but she was listening to her body, and her body said, Who cares?

She called her parents down in Florida, and her mom said, "Hi, honey. How are you doing?"

"I'm O.K.," Debra said, balancing her plate on the arm of the couch.

"Ed?" her mom said. "Debra's on the phone."

Debra's dad picked up and said, "What's new?"

"Our paperwork is finished."

"It's finalized?" Her mom was disbelieving. It had been so long.

"Done."

She could hear her parents mulling what to say. The paperwork was done, and it was weird and painful, like picking off a scab, because the marriage itself had ended two years before.

"Well, that's a relief," her mom said.

But Debra's dad spoke in the voice he reserved for his deepest disappointments. "All right. That's that."

"I'm wondering," Debra's mom ventured. "Should I take down your wedding picture?"

"Cindy," her dad chided.

"You've still got that picture up?" Debra said.

Her mom sounded embarrassed. "I was just—"

Debra said, "It's fine. Either way."

"You don't mind?"

"Why should I mind a picture?" Debra asked, although in retrospect she thought her beaded gown unfortunate. "I have the whole album."

"You look at your album?" her mother said, gasping.

"No, but I'm not going to get rid of it. The girls might want it! I'm not erasing history."

Silence, and she knew that her mom was gazing at the photo in its gilt frame. "You look so happy."

"I *was* happy," Debra said.

"And Richard was so young!"

"Yes, Mom. He was young." Debra almost laughed—and then she felt guilty for mocking, even inwardly, because how could her parents know what to say? How could anybody? What clueless things would Debra tell her own daughters? They were in tenth and seventh grade, and, obviously, a million years from marrying, let alone divorcing—but if they did. Would you admit the truth? Debra asked herself. Would you say this was not what I imagined? This was never what I hoped for you?

Debra took out the trash and picked up a package by the door. New earbuds for Sophie, who had lost hers. Then she took Max out to romp and sniff and chase his rubber ball in the back yard. The girls never set foot here anymore. At sixteen and thirteen, their days of racing and foraging were done, but Max never outgrew anything.

"*You* need a yard, Maxy. Yes, you do!" She threw the ball, and he streaked off, untiring. Did he wonder where the girls had gone? Debra was sure he missed them, and she was glad he didn't know it would get worse. In just two and a half years, Sophie would leave for college, Lily would follow, and then what? Debra didn't want to sell the house, but could she and Max afford to stay? Would he even live that long? Oh, no!

Admittedly, Debra tended toward the worst-case scenario. It made Richard crazy, because she was always, as he said, fast-forwarding. But she had foresight. She prepared. She planned meals and vacations, scheduled lessons, preregistered for summer camp. Slow down, Richard would beg her. Cut back, get help! (Of course, he never considered helping. When they fought he said, But you insist on doing everything.)

This was true. No one had ever told Debra to stay home and do everything; that came from her. Nothing compelled her but her conscience and her common sense. When the girls were babies, she gave up free time and exercise. When they were older, she gave up her job, because two people could not work the kind of hours they did and see their children while they were awake. And because she wanted to eat real food. And because she did not want to outsource every single aspect of her life. And because those were years you could not get back, and because she hoped someday to return, if not to law, to something new. Education? Social justice? Counselling?

Together, Debra and Max examined icy puddles under the girls' old climbing structure and green slide. It was exhilarating to think of all the possibilities—how she might teach or advocate for immigrants—but when she thought of Richard she saw his future as domestic. He would remarry. It was obvious to her—to everyone. He was already living with his girlfriend, Heather, who was smart and beautiful and sane. The girls adored her; Debra approved. As for Richard, he was better than he had ever been. Eating healthy, losing weight. The girls said he'd stopped sneaking cigarettes.

"Good for you," Debra had told him a few days earlier.

"Yeah, I'm doing it," Richard said.

She looked at him with sudden insight. He was taking the plunge. The paperwork was done. "You're going to propose!"

He looked startled. "I meant quitting."

"Oh! I'm sorry."

"I wouldn't propose without talking to the girls." He was reddening around the ears.

She nodded. "That's smart."

"We want them to be—"

"Yeah," she said.

"Comfortable. We want it to be natural."

"They'll be ecstatic," she encouraged him.

"Thanks," he said.

A sweet moment, a really good

exchange. “I was proud of us,” Debra told her therapist, Suzanne, the next day. Truly, she was happy for Richard, and relieved that he was done dating women half his age. Heather was someone Debra could work with. Someone she could respect.

It was a good thing. It was the right thing—and at the same time she knew that Richard’s remarriage would sting. The greater good would be another loss. “Does that even make sense?” she’d asked Suzanne.

“Totally.”

“But what can I do about it?”

“Do you always have to do something?” Suzanne answered.

And Debra sighed, because she knew that sometimes there was nothing to be done with feelings but to feel them. There was nothing to be done about her ex-husband and his new relationship except to watch events unfold. Debra understood all that. (She was good at therapy.) If only Richard and Heather would hurry up and get it over with.

That evening, Lily called from Richard’s place. “Guess what?” she said, and Debra’s heart leaped. This was it.

“What?” Debra said.

“We’re making pizza from scratch.”

“Oh.”

“We should do this sometime,” Lily told her.

“O.K. Sure!” Debra heard laughter in the background.

“Mom, we have to get a pizza stone.”

“We have one.”

“But it broke,” Lily reminded her. “We should get another one.”

“O.K.”

“Then after dinner we’re getting gelato.”

That was when Richard and Heather would tell the girls, except they wouldn’t tell them; they would ask. They would sit together, the four of them, and Richard would say, Girls, we have a question for you. Or Heather would speak humbly: I will never replace your mom, but I want to ask you if I can be on your team and support you forever. Or they would say together, Girls, we have a present for you. You don’t have to wear them all the time—or ever—but we want to give you these necklaces.

Debra could imagine it every which way, the squeals of delight, the delicate gold chains, everything sensitive and meaningful. Richard would be kneeling, or Heather—or both of them! And there would be hugs and happy tears. “Have a wonderful time,” Debra told Lily now. “Let me know how it goes.”

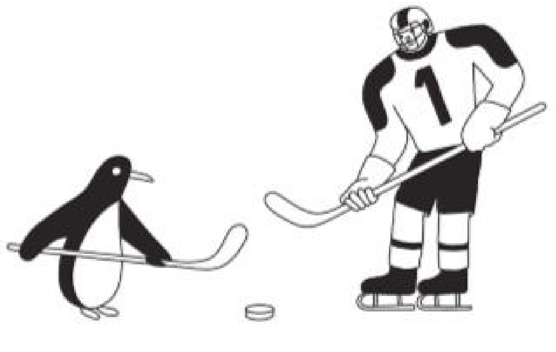
“Bye, Mom. Love you.”

Lily always said goodbye like that, and Sophie, too. Love you, they chirped on every occasion—even when they called to say that the car pool was late. Love you, love you, until the words meant nothing. They might as well have said, Talk soon. Where did that come from? Summer camp? It irked her, although it didn’t bother anybody else. Plenty of parents spoke to their kids that way as well. Becca declared, “I always say ‘Love you’ to my kids, because who knows what could happen? What if you were hit by a bus? Wouldn’t you want your last words to be ‘Love you’?”

Debra said, “Not if it’s just habit.” Love you. Killed by a bus. The whole thing made her sad. She walked through the empty house. Then she vacuumed the first floor and cleaned the girls’ rooms.

The kids won’t learn to clean up after themselves if you do it for them, Richard used to remind her. He had been scrupulous about telling the girls to do whatever task Debra required. *Do as I say, not as I do.*

She shook her head and picked up laundry from the floor. School clothes, leotards, balled-up tights. Lily’s rug was sea green, Sophie’s fluffy white. She’d said she wanted white like Maxy’s fur, and that was what she got. Her rug was furry, and it shed. Legos used to disappear in it. What was that, caught in the white shag? An earbud right at the foot of Sophie’s bed. And there was the other one. Debra almost called to say, I found them! Right after the new ones were delivered! But she resisted.



They’d be at the gelato place by now. Finishing up. Driving back to Richard’s condo. Debra expected the news any second, but nobody called.

How was the gelato? she texted at last.

Good, Lily texted back.

When the girls returned, nothing had changed. Richard and Heather were not engaged. Debra had been fast-forwarding again.

“Have you ever had Cherry Amaretto?” Sophie asked.

“Is that what you got?”

“We tried Heather’s.”

Debra tried to picture Heather with a fruit flavor. Heather seemed more cookies and cream.

“It was weird,” Lily said.

But nothing else seemed strange to them. In fact, they were lighter, happier than when they had left. Trust Heather—a trail runner and a hiker—to leave kids better than she’d found them. The girls hugged Max, went up to their rooms, and did their homework. Even Lily, who worried at night, did not seem sad at all, and curled up in bed with her book about girls learning to be witches, or possibly princesses, at boarding school.

And life was good, and it was ordinary. It was school and ballet and groceries and dinner and pre-algebra and world history, and the next weekend Debra had the girls, and she made waffles. All was calm until the following Thursday.

Then Richard came in and played with Max while the girls were dragging their bags downstairs, and he said in a low voice, “Debra, I have to tell you something.”

That was a bad sign. “Go out to the car,” Debra called to the girls as Richard started pacing. He forgot Max completely. “What is it?” Debra asked.

“Well . . .” he began.

“Is it Heather?”

“Yes.”

She froze. Were he and Heather breaking up? Now? Now that the girls were used to her? Had he really screwed up this relationship already? “You didn’t.”

“Didn’t what?” He shot back, instantly defensive.

“Richard. What’s going on?”

He hesitated for just a second,

and then he said, "We're expecting."

"Wait, what?" The words didn't even register at first.

"We're expecting a baby in January."

"But I thought you were— You aren't even— Aren't you getting engaged?"

"We're planning to."

"And when are you going to tell the girls? And when will you get married?"

"I wanted to ask you about telling them. I mean, it's good news."

She took a breath. "It's a lot of good news at once."

"Exactly."

"Congratulations!"

"Thank you."

"I'm just—I was just surprised."

"We didn't want to wait too long."

Wait? she thought. You didn't wait at all.

"Lissa—"

"Who?"

"Heather's sister is having a terrible time getting pregnant."

Debra stood there bewildered, because why were they talking about Heather's sister's infertility? "When are you getting married?"

"After the baby."

"O.K.," she said slowly. She had foreseen engagement, and then marriage, not an instant family.

He said, "Are you worried it will be weird for the girls?"

"Well, yeah."

"Because you think it's wrong to have a baby first?"

"No." She wasn't going to be the bad guy, the moralistic one, the evil fairy at the christening! She realized something now. The king's first wife—that's who the evil fairy would have been. But that wasn't Debra. Not at all. She just needed a minute. She had never imagined Heather in a rush, or Richard so nervous and so glad, and she felt a pang, hearing his good fortune. Once upon a time, Debra had wanted a third child, but Richard had objected, and she had listened. "It's just so much at once."

"That's why we want to talk to them."

The front door opened. "Dad," Sophie said.

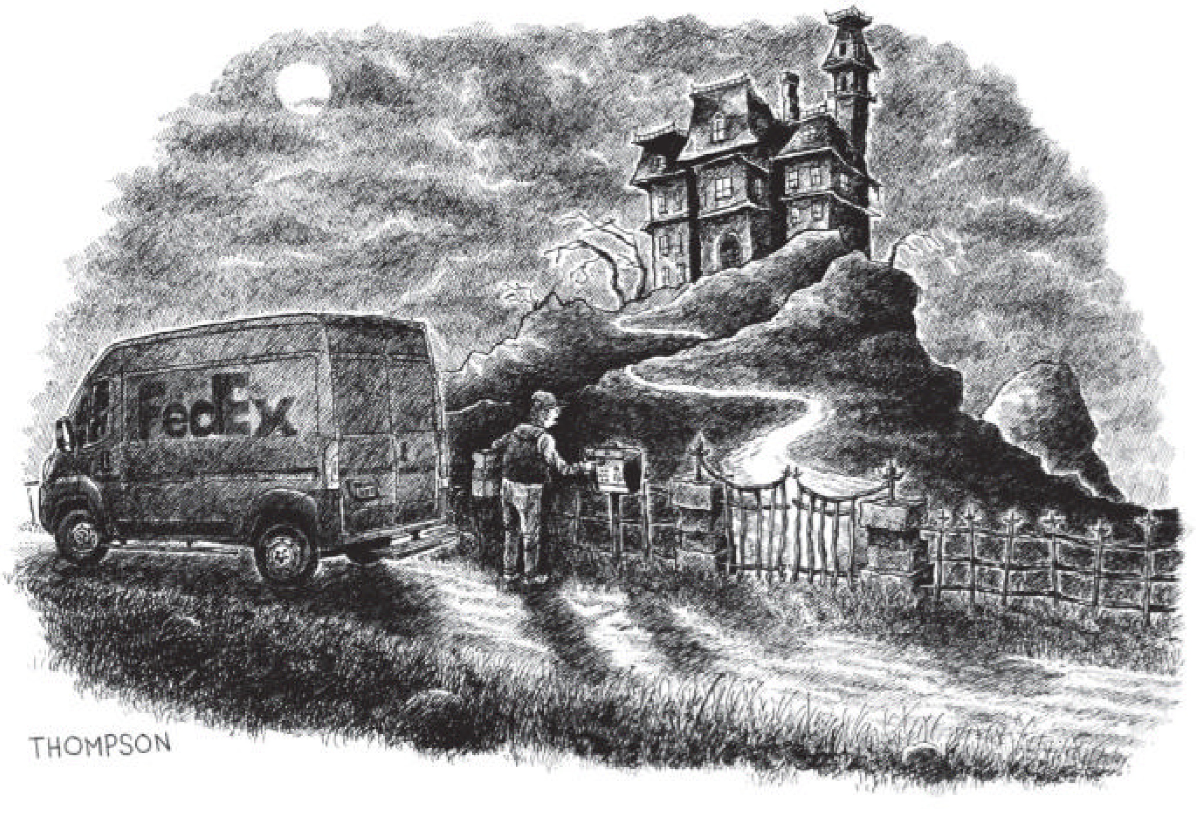
Lily called from the open car, "You're taking forever."

He called back, "One second."

"Let's figure out a plan," Debra told Richard.

"Great!" He was speaking in that cheerful tone he adopted when the kids were near.

Debra said, "Team meeting."



"No, sorry, you need to sign for it."

• • •

The three of them met at the Abandoned Luncheonette. Richard sipped kombucha and Debra had black coffee and Heather had nothing.

"Why don't you try the water?" Debra suggested.

And Heather smiled. She appreciated Debra's sense of humor. Of course she did, because she was perfect—even if she looked a little pale.

"How are you feeling?" Debra asked.

"Eh," Heather said, and Richard took her hand.

"She's a trouper." Richard could have been talking about Lily, but Heather didn't seem offended.

Debra asked, "Are you going to find out whether it's a boy or a girl?"

They spoke at the same time. "I think so," Richard said.

"I'm not sure," Heather said.

"Well, either way," Richard said.

Debra interjected, "But you're going to tell the girls that you're expecting."

"Of course!" Heather said.

Richard said, "We have to."

"Here's the thing," Debra told them, and now she saw Richard getting tense. He hated hearing a thing. "I think you should get engaged first and then let a little time pass before telling them about the . . . I think it's important for them to know—"

"That we're all in this together," Heather said.

"Exactly."

"That this is forever," Heather said.

Debra said, "Right."

As for Richard, he said nothing. He would do what Heather wanted. He, who had insisted he could not handle a third child. This was different. Debra understood that. This wasn't a third child born into their old family with their old wars. He and Heather were a new beginning. This was the way of things, that women had their babies and they stopped, while men lived like starfish, constantly regenerating.

"I love the girls so much," Heather was saying. "I want to include them when we get engaged."

I got that part right, Debra thought.

Heather said, "I want to dedicate myself to them."

You're great, Debra thought. You really are. And, at the same time, you have no idea. Parenting times three. The sleepless nights ahead, the tantrums and book reports and standardized tests and the million ways that kids in middle school are mean.

Heather said, "We'll write a family proposal."

"Thank you," Debra said, and meant

it. “I think that will be wonderful,” she told Heather, because why scare her? And the new baby would be beautiful. She envied Heather that, although she was grateful for the daughters that she had.

“I’m glad we did this!” Heather said, when they were walking to the cars. Richard hugged his future fiancée’s shoulders. He kissed her ear.

And Debra didn’t feel alone at all. She didn’t mind watching. She just felt like the last grownup on earth as she called after them, “I’m glad we’re all on the same page.”

The next weekend, she was forewarned and forearmed. She had in her possession a folder with the proposal. Heather had sent it, so Debra was like the press corps with the full text of the speech the President was about to give. And, better than the press, she had printed two copies on archival paper. Even as her daughters were off listening to Richard and Heather pledge their troth, Debra was sitting at the kitchen table framing the documents, so that each girl would have a copy in her room:

> Family Proposal
> We propose to be there for each other every day.
> To respect differences and appreciate each person for who they are.
> To make sure everyone in our family is seen and heard.
> To honor each other’s feelings.
> To be on one team.

Debra’s phone was ringing. It was Lily, and she was on speaker. Debra could hear Sophie and Heather and Richard in the background talking as Lily shouted, “We’re engaged!”

“Mazel tov!”

“And we’re expecting!” Sophie added.

“Oh, wow,” Debra said automatically. So much for letting a little time pass. “That’s so great.”

“Mom!” Sophie said. “You already knew, didn’t you?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny,” Debra said, and she heard Heather saying Ha! “This is so great!” Debra repeated. “This is really, really wonderful.” She said it, but her body ached. Her arms, her legs, her heart.

“It’s going to be a girl,” Lily said.

Debra said, “They told you?”

“Lily just wants it to be a girl.” That was Sophie’s older-sister voice.

The phone was ringing over there at Richard’s place. Debra could hear it in the background. “Sorry, it’s my parents,” Heather said. “Mom? Hi!”

“We should talk to them,” Richard said.

“And we need to make dinner,” Heather reminded him.

Crashing sounds and laughter. Heather’s voice: “Yes! We’re here with the girls. We all proposed to each other!”

“O.K. I have to go,” Lily told Debra after a minute. “Love you!”

Everyone was happy. Everyone was young. As for Debra, she was relieved. She was actually glad that Richard and Heather had shared all their news at once. She almost wished they’d revealed the gender, too, and named the baby, and that their perfect child was in school, and Richard was showing just how involved he could be the second time around. I have so much more patience now, he would say, as older parents always did. I am so much calmer. Debra wished it had all happened already, so she didn’t have to watch.

In the twilight, she got the leash and took Max for a walk. The earth was damp, the grass tender. The neighbor kids were biking up and down the street, looping in parabolas. She stood watching, as she called her sister.

“Hey,” she said.

Immediately, Becca said, “The deed is done?”

“Yup.”

“And how was it?”

“It was great. It was beautiful.”

“Were you there? You sound like you were there.”

“No! I wasn’t there. I heard from the girls. And they also know about the baby.”

“I thought Richard was waiting to tell them.”

“Apparently not.”

“I thought you had that big meeting.”

“We did, and Richard sat there agreeing to everything.”

There was a pause, and then Becca said, “He’s just bad.”

“He isn’t bad,” Debra said numbly.

“Yes, he is!”

“He’s inconsiderate,” Debra said. “That doesn’t make him bad.”

“Whatever,” Becca said. “You can call it what you want. He blindsided you!”

“No, Max!” Debra called. He was straining at the leash, barking at a beagle. “He’s getting violent,” Debra told Becca. “I have to go.”

“Max isn’t violent.”

“He has a thing about little dogs.” Debra was maligning her own sweet Max just to get off the phone.

“Hey, Debra. It’s O.K. to be angry,” said Becca, who taught creative movement. “You can scream! You can dance it out.”

Debra pulled Max across the street. “Yeah, I don’t think I’m in that kind of shape right now.”

“No, anyone can do this! Listen, it takes two seconds. Plant your feet.”

Debra planted her feet on the sidewalk as Max looked quizzically at her.

“Breathe in and tighten your whole body. Make fists.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Then open your hands. Release your breath. Let go.”

Debra opened her left hand, because she was still holding the leash in her right. She exhaled. Then she said, “Let what go?”

“The whole thing.”

“Oh.”

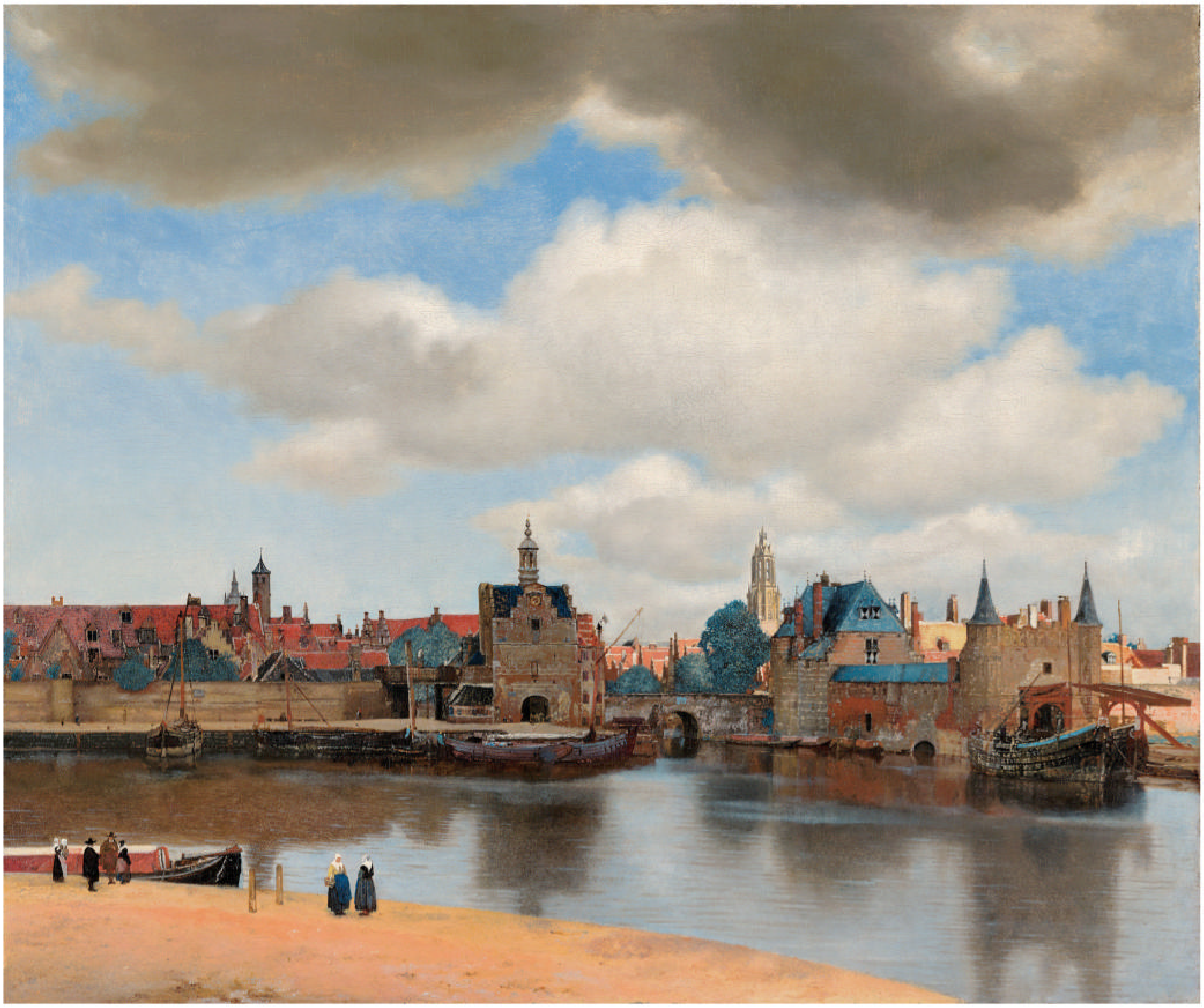
“I can show you some other ones,” Becca said. “That’s just a mini-ritual. Anyone can practice that at whatever level. Just try it whenever you feel the need.”

“Thanks,” Debra said. “Will do.”

She took Max home and let him run around while she sat on the girls’ old swing. He was looking for his ball. Several times he ran up as if to ask, Where did it go?

Max sniffed her knees. He wanted her to hunt, but she said, “I can’t, Max. Sometimes you have to rest. You know?” His ears pricked up; he could detect even a hint of sadness. “It’s O.K. It will be O.K. I promise. You keep looking, and if you still can’t find your ball I’ll buy a new one. And then as soon as I buy a new one the old one will turn up.” Max buried his head in her lap as she said, “I don’t know why it happens. It’s funny, right? But that’s just how it goes.” ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Allegra Goodman on babies, dogs, and exes.



JOHANNES VERMEER / COURTESY MAURITSHUIS / RIJKSMUSEUM

In "View of Delft" (circa 1660), Vermeer hangs the sky with low cumulus clouds. He paints dampness as well as light.

THE ART WORLD

DUTCH TREAT

A bravura show at the Rijksmuseum gathers more Vermeers at once than the artist himself ever saw.

BY REBECCA MEAD

In the spring of 1914, James Simon, an art collector in Berlin, was approached by a London-based dealer with a proposition: Would he accept two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for a work in his collection, Johannes Vermeer's "Mistress and Maid"? The would-be buyer was Henry Clay Frick, the American industrialist, who in the late nineteenth century had embarked on an acquisition binge of Old Masters, and who already owned two works by the seventeenth-century painter from Delft. Simon's answer was definitive: although he had received equally lavish offers from other buyers—Frick was far from alone in his desire to gild his Gilded Age fortune with Golden Age masterpieces—he would not part with the painting. Five years and a crippling Great War later, however, Simon found himself in a weaker bargaining position, and for nearly three hundred thousand dollars—the equivalent of roughly five million dollars today—"Mistress and Maid" was shipped across the Atlantic to Frick's mansion, on Fifth Avenue, where its new owner enjoyed only a short while in its company before his death, in late 1919. The painting—which depicts a lady seated at a table with a writing set, interrupted by a maid holding a letter—has remained at the mansion more or less undisturbed ever since. Frick turned his home into a museum bearing his name, and it has long been its policy not to lend his acquisitions to other institutions.

In 2021, when the Frick started renovations at the mansion and moved its collection off-site, a chink of light in the institution's tightly shuttered terms was spotted: during this interregnum, the works could finally travel. "Mistress and Maid"—along with the Frick's two other Vermeers, "Officer and Laughing Girl" and "Girl Interrupted at Her Music"—has now recrossed the Atlantic, returning to the Netherlands for a landmark show at the Rijksmuseum, in Amsterdam. The Rijksmuseum has corralled enough Vermeers to make the most hard-hearted of robber barons swoon—twenty-eight paintings, out of an acknowledged thirty-six or thirty-seven surviving works by the artist, who may have produced no more than fifty in his short lifetime. (Vermeer died suddenly in 1675, at the age of forty-three.) As Taco Dibbits, the general director of the Rijksmuseum, points out, the exhibition gathers more Vermeers in one place than Vermeer himself ever had the opportunity to see.

"Mistress and Maid," which Vermeer painted sometime in the mid-sixteen-sixties—and which used to hang in the West Gallery of the Frick mansion, near works by Rembrandt and Constable—now has a wall of its own, at the heart of the exhibition. At right angles to it hangs "A Lady Writing," which was acquired in 1907 by another art-hungry American, John Pierpont Morgan, and is now in the collection of the National Gallery, in Washington. (The National Gallery held its own blockbuster Vermeer show in the mid-nineties, bringing together what was then an unprecedented twenty-one works.) The two paintings have thematic and stylistic commonalities. Each shows a fair-haired woman, finely dressed in a yellow satin jacket and seated at a table, with a pen in her right hand and a sheet of paper at the ready. Each displays Vermeer's uncanny command of optical effects, with a dissolving focus on the fur trim of the jacket and a sheeny light reflected from a pearl earring. A blue tablecloth is rucked up in almost identical disarray, a circumstance that would be nothing but an annoyance to an actual letter writer—who doesn't prefer to lay paper on a smooth surface?—but which reminds a viewer that these are carefully staged scenes, with the folds of those draperies as deliberately arranged as the garments of a Renaissance Madonna. It is peculiarly moving to see these two works, which were painted within two years of each other, in juxtaposition. A viewer can take in one, and then the other, with a turn of the head no greater than that of the woman represented in either painting. Between them, these works consumed perhaps a year of Vermeer's labor—a scrupulous rendering of bourgeois appurtenances and a faithful imagining of internal lives, which might better be described as an act of devotion.

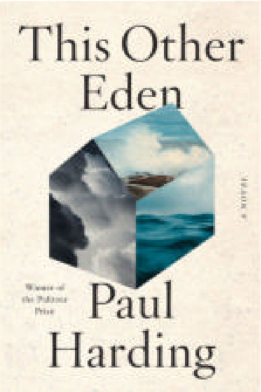
The Rijksmuseum show, which extends across ten galleries in the museum's special-exhibition wing, is organized thematically—Vermeer's use of musical instruments; Vermeer's depiction of gentleman callers—with works from differing periods placed together to show them to their best effect, like artfully rumpled drapery. (The gallery design, by Wilmotte & Associés Architectes, is similarly deft: extensive velvet drapes muffle the murmur of visitors, while the walls are painted in rich, dark colors lifted from a seventeenth-century palette.) A less than strict chronology also orders the display, which begins with Vermeer's only two known exterior scenes: "The Little Street," one of four works by the artist in the Rijksmuseum's own collection, and "View of Delft," which was borrowed from the Mauritshuis, in The Hague, and was painted in about 1660. The latter work, a cityscape in which the red-roofed town appears as a horizontal sliver between glimmering water below and a wide swath of sky above, inspired the rediscovery, beginning in the eighteen-sixties, of Vermeer, whose reputation had languished in the preceding two centuries. Its subject is light, which, as the artist expertly renders it, turns the spire of the Nieuwe Kerk a pale buttercream. But the painting also conveys the sensation of atmospheric humidity. In a catalogue essay, Pieter Roelofs, one of the show's curators and the head of paintings and sculpture at the museum, points out that Vermeer hangs this sky with low cumulus clouds of a sort that were almost never represented by his contemporaries. In this canvas, as in "The Little Street," with its weeping brickwork and stained whitewash, Vermeer paints dampness as well as light.

One of the best-known facts about Vermeer is how little is known about him; few documents survive him, and there are no contemporaneous descriptions of his methods, or accounts by his sitters. There are no drawings by him, or any definitive likenesses of him, though the three-quarter profile of a figure in an early work, "The Procuress," suggests that it may be a self-portrait. It's not the kind of sublimely refined figure one might imagine Vermeer to have been, however; this man is a sly, grinning onlooker to a lewd brothel scene, in which a soldier is putting a coin in a young woman's open palm with his right hand and cupping her breast proprietorially with his left. This large canvas, which Vermeer painted when he was in his early twenties, is on loan from the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden; it shares a gallery with several other paintings from the beginning of Vermeer's career, when he was experimenting with religious and mythological themes in various styles, among them Italianate. Aspiring Vermeer completists based in America or Europe will be grateful that the Rijksmuseum has included "Saint Praxedis"—a work, only in the past decade confirmed to be by Vermeer, that is usually displayed in the National Museum of Western Art, in Tokyo. An uninspired copy of an uninspiring painting by Felice Ficherelli, the work—which depicts a sweet-faced saint wringing from a sponge the blood of a nearby martyr who has just been decapitated—would hardly justify a trip to Japan.

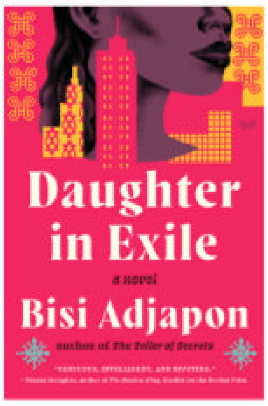
Little is known about Vermeer's painting of St. Praxedis—the attribution hinged in part on the fact that the canvas bears the signature "Meer 1655." But Roelofs and his co-curator, Gregor J. M. Weber, who is the Rijksmuseum's head of fine and decorative arts, suggest that scholarship has in fact uncovered a considerable amount of detail about Vermeer's life, beliefs, and practices. Of particular interest is an inventory of household objects made after his death, many of which Vermeer used and reused in his paintings, like the costumes and props kept by a travelling theatrical company: curtains, chairs, Oriental carpets, the yellow jacket with its fur trim. There is no trace of the lenses or other optical devices that many critics (and the artist David Hockney) have argued Vermeer must have employed. Weber, though, proposes that Vermeer obtained a camera obscura—in which a chink of light in an otherwise shuttered chamber produces an inverted image of the outside world—from a Jesuit church next door to his house. (The Jesuits had embraced the device as a tool for observing divine light.) Weber found a drawing, made by one of the priests, Isaac van der Mye, that features idiosyncrasies of the camera-obscura technique.

Mostly, however, there are only the paintings to go on. High-tech analyses, at the Rijksmuseum and elsewhere, have uncovered sometimes surprising evidence about Vermeer's methods. A single gallery is dedicated to "Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window," on loan from Dresden. Generations of museumgoers have known the work as a virtuoso exploration of perspective: a drawn curtain in the foreground reveals a rug-draped table, beyond which stands a girl with a bare wall behind her. More than forty years ago, X-ray technology revealed that behind the girl's head Vermeer had originally placed a large painting of a cupid, which had been covered up; in 2017, further analysis determined that the overpainting had been done decades after Vermeer's death. The cupid painting has now been painstakingly uncovered, and it takes up a quarter of the canvas, offering an unsubtle indication of the girl's thoughts. The painting, though, is most mesmerizing in its tiniest details, such as the points of light on the silken ends of the curtain's tassels. An exquisite reflection of the girl's

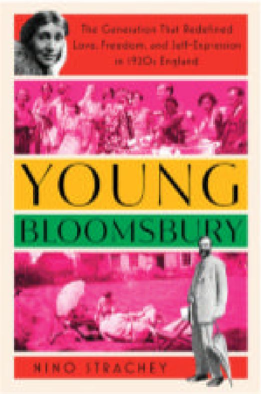
BRIEFLY NOTED



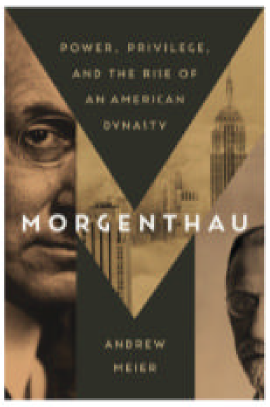
This Other Eden, *by Paul Harding (Norton).* This historical novel takes inspiration from the formation, in the mid-nineteenth century—and, in 1912, the forced eviction—of a mixed-race fishing community on Malaga Island, Maine. Harding's version is called Apple Island, and he movingly depicts the islanders' dispossession. He imbues his characters with mythological weight—a world-drowning flood is the island's foundational story—without losing the texture of their daily lives, which are transformed by a white missionary. Of his presence, one islander observes, "No good ever came of being noticed by mainlanders," foreshadowing the arrival of eugenicist doctors wielding skull-measuring calipers, a project to remake the island as a tourist destination, and the destruction of the community.



Daughter in Exile, *by Bisi Adjapon (HarperVia).* In this bildungsroman wrapped in a migrant story, Lola, a pregnant Ghanaian, travels to New York to join her fiancé, an American marine. After he ghosts her, she ends up near Washington, D.C., relying on the generosity of a succession of strangers and friends to navigate the harsh realities of life in the U.S. Her experience of sisterhood and solidarity among women reshapes her understanding of her relationship with her own mother. "In this world, you never know when you'll be the one in need of help," one benefactor tells Lola. "Who knows, one day my child might need someone too."


The Generation That Redefined Love, Freedom, and Self-Expression in 1920s England
YOUNG
BLOOMSBURY
NINO STRACHEY

Young Bloomsbury, *by Nino Strachey (Atria).* This lively group biography offers an intimate glimpse of the Bright Young Things, the artistic coterie that emerged in the nineteen-twenties as successors to the prewar Bloomsburyites. Members included Eddy Sackville-West, a novelist and cousin of Virginia Woolf's lover Vita Sackville-West, and John Strachey, a journalist and cousin of Lytton Strachey. The author, herself a member of the Strachey clan, sees "transgressive sociability" as a hallmark of this generation, whose members were proto-"social influencers" and moved "seamlessly between gallery, studio, and nightclub." She applauds the group's embrace of sexual freedom, which gave queer members a sense of "life-affirming normality in a generally hostile adult world" and fostered "an inclusive way of living not seen again for another century."



Morgenthau, *by Andrew Meier (Random House).* Opening in 1866 in New York with the arrival from Germany of Lazarus Morgenthau, a Bavarian Jew who'd lost a cigar empire to American tariffs, this book traces the ups and downs (but mostly ups) of the family's fortunes over four generations, providing a window on a century and a half of the city's history. Lazarus's son Henry was a lawyer, a real-estate baron, and a diplomat, whose son Henry, Jr., served Franklin Roosevelt as Treasury Secretary; *his* son, Robert, was the city's longest-serving District Attorney, who oversaw some three million cases. There's enough here for four separate biographies, but Meier ably synthesizes the various strands, finding family likenesses among his disparate subjects.

head in the open window is a visual doubling that also poses a question: Could she be of two minds about the love letter she is reading, the cupid's looming presence notwithstanding?

One way to insure that your show has a record-breaking count of Vermeers is to be inclusive in your accounting. From the National Gallery comes not just the small, fabulous "Girl with the Red Hat"—whose gamine subject glances over her shoulder with an expression that somehow falls on the border between total confidence and total unease—but also "Girl with a Flute," a figure with similar features less finely rendered. The National Gallery recently downgraded "Flute" to "Studio of Johannes Vermeer," even though nothing is known of the artist's having had pupils or associates of any sort. The National Gallery contends that its analysis of the paint and the brushwork suggests a less skillful hand than Vermeer's; the Rijksmuseum counters that similar deficits can also be found in other, uncontested works by Vermeer.

Across the gallery is another attribution puzzle. The delicate "Lacemaker," usually housed at the Louvre, has been hung alongside "Young Woman Seated at a Virginal," whose authorship was questioned until, among other things, it was determined that the canvas had a weave matching that of the Louvre painting, and likely came from the same bolt. ("Young Woman Seated at a Virginal" is the only mature work by Vermeer to be in private hands; it belongs to Thomas Kaplan, an American billionaire businessman, and his wife, Daphne Recanati Kaplan, who also own the largest private collection of works by Rembrandt. Unlike Frick, Kaplan and his wife do not live with their art; they have gathered their paintings and drawings as the Leiden Collection, which operates as an Old Master lending library.)

The exhibit has a few unfortunate absences, including one of Vermeer's most resplendent compositions, "The Art of Painting," which depicts a painter working on a model posing as Clio, the Muse of history, in a studio more sumptuous than Vermeer could ever have afforded, with black-and-white marble floor tiles and a brass chandelier. The painting's owner, the Kunsthistorisches Museum, in Vienna, declined to lend it, citing in part its fragility (though it travelled five times between 1999 and 2004). The Louvre's other Vermeer, "The Astronomer," had already been promised to the Louvre Abu Dhabi. The pendant piece to it, "The Geographer," on loan from Frankfurt, is therefore the show's only image of a solitary man. The light from a window falls on his globe, his papers, and his forehead, "emphasizing the scientist's intellectual focus on the world," according to the wall text nearby.

Vermeer's greater fascination was with the world of women—mistresses and maids alike. "Girl with a Pearl Earring" is on short-term loan; she goes back to the Mauritshuis at the end of March, two months before the exhibition closes. If Vermeer's more accessorized interiors have their contemporary, bastardized equivalents in curated Instagram posts, "Girl with a Pearl Earring" is a paparazzi shot—its subject looks startled and not especially gratified by the attention. In "Woman in Blue Reading a Letter," both the subject's capacious robe and the shadows on the wall behind her are painted—like the pearl girl's head scarf—with precious ultramarine pigment. This costly choice lends a celestial touch to the mundane, an effect that Vermeer also employed when rendering the lead panes on the window of "Young Woman with a Water Pitcher," which is owned by the Metropolitan Museum. (That painting, and two of the Met's other Vermeers, have stayed in New York, either because they are too fragile to travel or because the terms of their bequest forbid it, although the Met has lent its two remaining Vermeer works.) In "Woman in Blue Reading a Letter," the figure rests her arm on a swelling belly, suggesting that she is pregnant—as Vermeer's wife, Catharina Bolnes, who bore fourteen or fifteen children in twenty-two years, was for most of their marriage. Scholars are justified in characterizing Vermeer's works—created in a domestic context that must often have been chaotic—as representing idealized moments of calm. But only a critic who has never been pregnant would look at a woman who appears to be in her third trimester and see stillness. The woman in blue is gripping the letter tightly with both hands—a map on the wall could signify that her partner is away at sea—and, in addition to her roiling emotions, she must be feeling the kicks and squirms of an imminent newcomer.

The jewel of the Rijksmuseum's own Vermeer collection, "The Milkmaid," is given a room of its own—something the young model who posed for the painting most likely did not enjoy. "The Milkmaid" is an exploration of minimalism, three hundred years *avant la lettre*. A recent analysis of the painting's surface revealed that Vermeer painted over a row of jugs that once hung behind the milkmaid's head, leaving a bare wall with the tonal nuances of a Morandi. The wall's surface is rendered with infinite care, its nails and holes painted in sharp relief. The graduation of shadow and light contributes to the sense of verisimilitude, though Vermeer adjusts optics for the sake of art by painting the jigsaw piece of wall between the jug and the milkmaid's arm a brighter hue, the better to accentuate her gesture. The eye is tricked into believing that it sees the world reproduced; what it actually sees is the world enhanced.

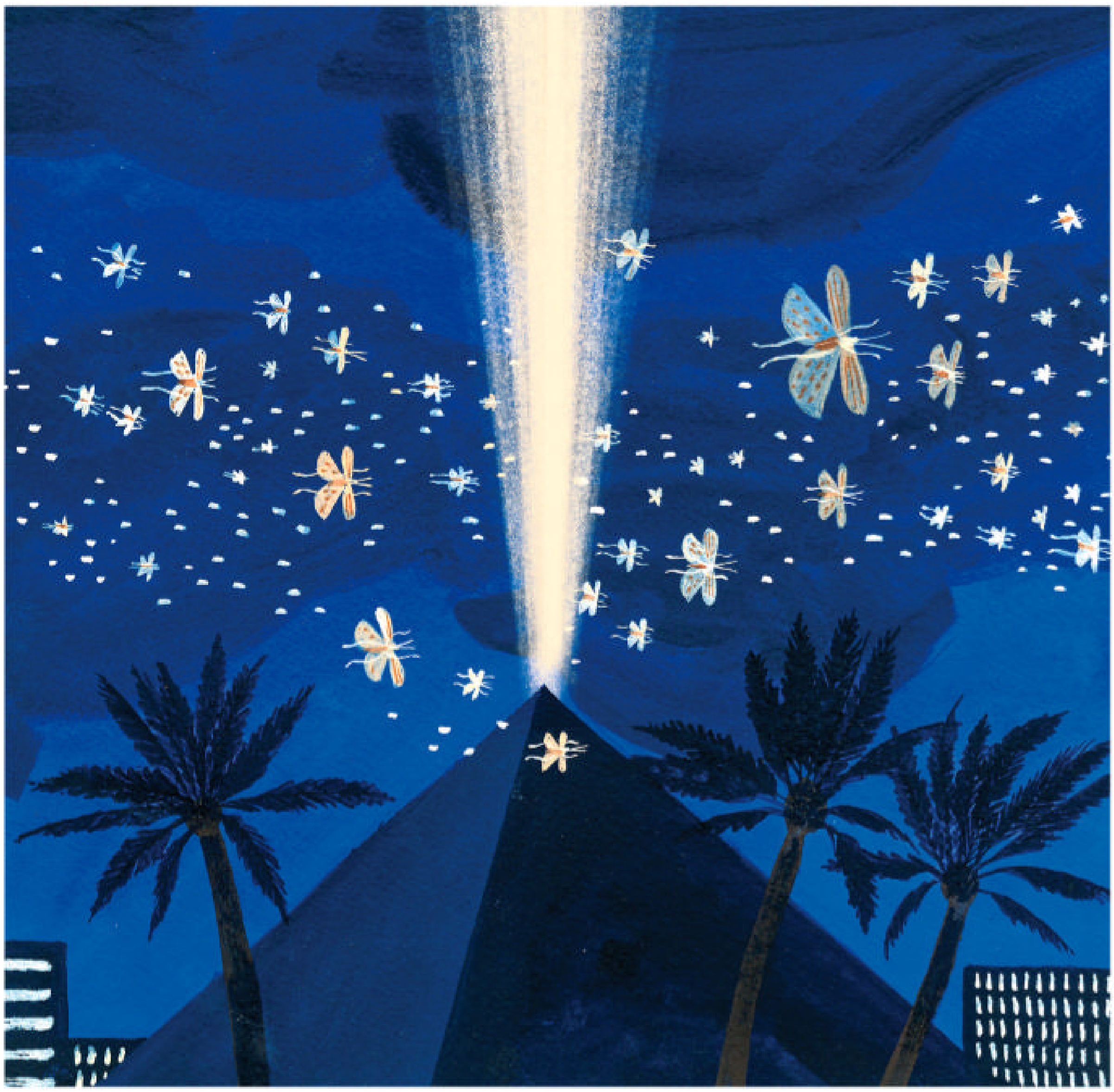
The viewer's vantage is that of someone seated slightly below the standing milkmaid, granting her a sturdy monumentality, her humble work elevated and dignified. She is a remarkable presence—worth waiting one's turn to lean against the velvet-covered guardrail that protects each painting, and taking a moment to commune with her. Critics have noted that a tiny cupid appears on a tile edging the wall behind her. Perhaps Vermeer intended viewers to infer that his milkmaid, too, had love on her mind. But who's to say that she is not, rather, reflecting on the task of pouring milk from a heavy jug—on the care that she must take in doing so, on the strength in her young arms? Perhaps she is thinking of neither love nor work, and is instead reflecting on how the slow, perpetual flow of milk serves as an endless measure of time—just as it appears to us now, as we regard her in her reverie. Like Vermeer's other women, the milkmaid evades trite allegory. The light falls on her forehead, too. ♦

BOOKS

TURN OFF THE LIGHT

What's lost when darkness becomes endangered?

BY ADAM GOPNIK



The Luxor Hotel's powerful "sky beam" confuses flying creatures drawn to the light.

Among the many looming ecological disasters that terrify us today, one that only a handful of people have contemplated as sufficiently looming and terrifying is the loss of the bats in our belfry. According to "The Darkness Manifesto" (Scribner), by the Swedish ecologist Johan Eklöf, most churches in southwest Sweden had bat colonies back in the nineteen-eighties, and now most of them don't. Light pollution, his research suggests, has been a major culprit: "District after district has installed modern floodlights to show the architecture it's proud of, all the while the animals—who have for centuries found safety in the darkness of the church towers and who have for 70 million years made the night their abode—are slowly but surely vanishing from these places."

The presence of bats in the belfry, as a metaphor for disordered thinking, is usually taken to refer to the way bats would flutter around the upper stories of distressed churches, but a larger madness, Eklöf thinks, is responsible for their absence. A professor at Stockholm University, he is an expert in bats, which might suggest a *déformation professionnelle* in his interest in darkness, the way an expert in roosters might have a weakness for the dawn. He is able to tell us authoritatively that, though bats do indeed use natural sonar to echolocate their way around, their eyes see well enough in the dark to help in their navigation. (As so often, nature's secret to survival is not one perfect plan but a little bit of this and a little bit of that.) Of course, Eklöf's arguments escape the narrow world of roof eaves and pointy ears. Though the book is written as a sort of "Silent Spring" manifesto against the ecological devastations of light pollution, its considerable charm depends on the encyclopedic intensity with which he evokes the hidden creatures of the night.

Agreeably in love with darkness, Eklöf is not entirely a sentimentalist about it. Sex and violence rule the night sky as much as they ruled the drive-in movies that the night sky once superintended. What governs the sunless vistas is not a peaceable kingdom but a fierce contest for life, occasionally made vivid for us by the fiery, bioluminescent nature of its display. The firefly is signalling and winking as desperately as a Raymond Chandler heroine for a mate, until a greedy frog, like a Chandler gangster, stops everything and devours it. Eklöf makes it clear that the great Cambrian explosion of species, which began the evolution of animal eyes that could translate light into images, was set off by the advent of predation and countermeasures to it. Advanced animal evolution—and optical perception—began when creatures realized that they could make a better living by eating one another than by staying in place and absorbing nutrients from the ooze around them. Teeth and shells, claws and hide, rose in a flurry, and among the foremost of the defenses were eyes to sense the presence of a predator.

The difference between light and dark is, in a way, arbitrary: what counts as light and what as darkness depends on what wavelengths we discern. But the nocturnal world gives rise to creatures, equipped with large-pupilled and infrared-sensitive eyes, that see what we cannot and that, under cover of darkness, act as we can only imagine. And so Eklöf's book is made most memorable by the sometimes wild eccentricities of the life-forms it chronicles. Though his catalogue of catastrophe is real, what one most remembers are the beasts in his bestiary.

We learn, for instance, of the ghost moths, a species in which the adult males appear in fields in twilight, white as their namesakes and just as evanescent-seeming, floating eerily as they signal to the females—only to mate once and then fall to the ground dead. Mouthless by nature, they, like various others of their

ILLUSTRATION BY CARSON ELLIS

order, never feed at all in their adult lives. They do not sow, or reap; they merely fornicate once in the dark and die. (The females carry the eggs from their lonely coupling to distribute across the fields, and then die themselves.) Though Eklöf tells us that these Tristan-and-Isolde-like creatures are threatened by the confusing presence of artificial light and that moths play a crucial role as pollinators (“something of invaluable importance for keeping our ecosystem intact and thriving”), what one recalls is the plaintive doom of their couplings.

Biological creatures ourselves, we pair our lives with the rest of biology. “It is fascinating to imagine how nocturnal animals experience their existence in the dark, how their brains interpret sensory stimuli,” Eklöf writes. He cites approvingly Thomas Nagel’s famous philosophical essay on why we as humans cannot know what it feels like to be a bat. And yet we can *imagine* it—certainly, we can imagine what it would be like to be an owl. We may not live as owls do, mating once to make baby owls and then, after the owlets have safely flown away, going off to separate perches. But we can imagine how it would feel to soar alone all night, see your spouse for a brief period to raise the kids, and then head off for a divorced life in your own studio on the opposite side of town. A naturalist’s acts of empathy can be emancipating even if incomplete.

Alongside the spectral ghost moths come the speckled and companionable cabbage moths, as ready for one-night stands as Bobby in Sondheim’s “Company.” Only after the sun sets does the adult moth, having crawled from its chrysalis, look for a mate. “The female takes the first step by extending her antennae forward, flapping her wings, and secreting scents, at around ten in the evening,” Eklöf writes. “The two spend the night together, one wing of the female around the male’s body, then she leaves to lay the fertilized eggs.” But light ruins the romance: “The female emits fewer pheromones in the presence of artificial light, and furthermore, the composition of the scent is completely different from that emitted in darkness. So mating never gets started. The females wait in vain in the darkness.”

For all the poetic appeal of his examples, Eklöf has come to us from Sweden—his book is translated by Elizabeth DeNoma—bearing a noirish moral. The source of all this harmful light is, of course, *us*, city-dwelling human beings, who are presumably keeping the lights on all night in pursuit of our own couplings. Where once human life had its nocturnal rhythms, interrupted only by the dim light of candles and fireplaces, the Earth is now so lit up that, seen from space, it glows like a Japanese lantern. Since the invention of the light bulb, street lights and floodlights have come, ominously, to disturb age-old circadian rhythms, to the point that, Eklöf writes, “artificial light, the polluted light, is now dominant—light that causes birds to sing in the middle of the night, sends turtle babies in the wrong direction, and prevents the mating rituals of coral in reefs, which take place under the light of the moon.”

It turns out that the strongest source of illumination on Earth is not some helpful harborside lighthouse but the “sky beam” atop the Luxor Hotel, in Las Vegas. Creating forty-two *billion* candlepower of light every night, meant merely as a come-on to tourists and gamblers, it unintentionally excites and undoes flocks of birds, genetically programmed by evolution to fly toward bright light—and, in 2019, attracted clouds of grasshoppers, who flew toward the pseudo-Egyptian pyramid with all the horror of a pseudo-Egyptian plague. “Every evening Nevada’s meteorologists could see on their radar screens the swarms approach Las Vegas,” Eklöf says. Whoever would have imagined that reconstructing an Egyptian tomb and sending a piercing pillar of light from it to the heavens would reawaken an ancient curse—that is, aside from every screenwriter with a spec script? The, er, black comedy of this effect is not lost on Eklöf, but he sees it as something less than entertaining. In recent decades, he tells us, the biomass of all flying insect species has, by some measures, collapsed by close to seventy-five per cent.

Nor are bugs and birds alone affected by the light; so are plants, and so are humans. Our eyes adapt badly to darkness, and our night vision—which is activated by the pigment protein rhodopsin—takes a long while to turn on, as anyone who leans back on a car roof to watch the evening stars knows. By now, cities such as Singapore and Hong Kong are so brightly lit that their inhabitants scarcely call on night vision at all, and, as their rhodopsin becomes superfluous, they may well create descendants who, in even middling darkness, are as blind as, it turns out, bats are not.

The really insidious light pollution that people experience is of the indoor kind: our laptops and our devices bathe us in their light, and we find ourselves trapped in the same kind of death spiral that the Luxor beacon creates for the poor Las Vegas grasshoppers. Our daily

“Do you want me to make you a tea you’ll forget about until it’s gross and cold?”

cycles of melatonin and other sleep hormones are disrupted, with sometimes dire effects. "The body enters a vicious circle where stress and disturbed sleep go hand in hand," Eklöf writes. "We become vaguely depressed." Overweight, too: "Obesity has many causes, but one of these is constant low leptin levels, which is a direct result of the breaking down of the melatonin circle." The grasshoppers beam down to their burning death; we just grow chubby and cheerless.

Eklöf insists that doom is still avoidable. "Light pollution is the easiest of all environmental problems to solve, at least technically," he writes. "We, as private individuals, can, with little cost, reduce the amount of our light pollution. With light shades, downward-facing light sources low to the ground, and dim lighting, we can reduce the cities' total amount of light, as well as the artificial light scattered in the atmosphere."

Yet the glum practicality of the solution seems inadequate to the wound it describes. "The Darkness Manifesto" has, beyond its ecological arguments, a particular moral temperament. Eklöf does not merely think that too much artificial light is bad for our ecology, which it doubtless is; he thinks that light, and our preference for amplifying it, is in itself morally dubious. In his view, the will to light the night is in essence a will to power. Industrialized capitalism lights up our streets not to assist us on our path home but to show that its empire is inescapable. His point is made with a kind of good-humored if slightly puritanical melancholy that one thinks of as distinctly Swedish; in this spirit, he quotes Strindberg's observation that electric lighting, presented as betterment, was simply a way of getting workers to work more. Dimming the world is a necessary and reasonable goal, he believes, and he is encouraged by various green initiatives, including Earth Hour, an annual event newly promoted by the E.U., in which electric lights are kept off for sixty minutes, both to discourage power consumption and to remind us of the antique joys of candlelight.

Undoubtedly, the loss of night to artificial illumination is a loss for diversity in every sense, ecological and experiential. Yet we can wonder if what human beings mainly experience as improvements must, in every instance, be subordinated to the "welfare of the planet," a concept that is itself available only to humans. Nor are Eklöf's examples always exemplary. He notes that van Gogh's "Starry Night" could not be readily painted today, given the light pollution of contemporary Provence. ("Maybe this was a manifestation of his inner darkness, or simply how the night sky could be experienced as crackling and chaotic—before the entry of electric light.") But the gas lamps of London, enemies of night, were themselves another haunting Romantic subject, as van Gogh knew from his love of Whistler, with an equivalent poetry of their own, while in his earlier "Starry Night Over the Rhône" the bright lights of human habitation are themselves made to shine with an almost celestial aura.

Inevitably, what presents itself as empirical inquiry reflects a cultural mood. Every environmental apocalypse bears the imprint of the apocalyptic imagination of its time: even the Book of Revelation, with its raptures and its scarlet woman, has a rich underpinning in Roman imperial politics. In the same way, Paul Ehrlich's "The Population Bomb" (1968), now much derided, shared a semantic space with the sculptor Robert Smithson's "Nonsites," site-specific installations that were made in the same year and produced photographic monuments to the entropic wilderness of blighted post-industrial landscapes. Ehrlich's specific pessimism may have been empirically misconceived, but it was part of the poetic pessimism of its time and perhaps a necessary corrective to a preceding era of pro-growth boosterism—as Smithson's grim dust piles were correctives to the paradisiacal glow of industrial materials beloved of the other minimalists.

The allure of night is one of the great cultural discoveries of the Romantic era, with its twilight landscapes and piano nocturnes, and Eklöf's book is, sometimes knowingly and sometimes not, a Romantic one. If nature is made secondary to human will, as in classical and Enlightenment times, then a care for nature expresses itself in bucolics and pastorals—nature as a setting for human amorousness or agriculture. If the value of nature is an absolute, as it was for the Romantics, we discover ourselves in sublime nocturnes and moments of wonder. The Romantic love of darkness is a turn toward the embrace of nature in all her aspects. The faces that seemed hostile to us were to be as welcomed as those which seemed obviously benign.

The Romantic contradiction is that, since nature is in itself moral, no landscape can be left unmoralized by man. When the lights go off, we fumble in the dark for meaning as the ghost moth fumbles for its mate; the loss of night to artificial light thus becomes not merely a mistake but a sin. A few decades ago, expressions of an original taste in natural phenomena were usually sprightly or self-consciously eccentric in tone—Alexander Frater's wonderful travelogue "Chasing the Monsoon," in 1990, made the case for rain almost entirely on sensual grounds. Today, we would stress that rain is essential to life, an obvious truth, but one whose emphasis holds virtue to be more important than pleasure. Eklöf's nocturnal tastes are acceptable now only if we can make them part of a crusade.

It may seem unduly sunny, but surely not false, to say that we need both artificial light and natural darkness. Winged creatures rightly petition us to ease the intensity of the Luxor beam, but the city planners who insisted on mandating a high incandescent signature for every new sign in Times Square—the so-called LUTS (Light Units Times Square) measure—were aesthetes more than despoilers. Times Square must shine to remain timeless. We can want a brightly lit Vegas Strip, while still wanting the desert outside Vegas, or for that matter the suburbs of New Jersey, to offer the spectacle of stars. The Enlightenment taste for progress and the Romantic love of mystery may be cabbage moths who seek each other in the night.

"More light!," Goethe's famous deathbed command, was the battle cry of the Enlightenment, which produced the progressive-minded science that eventually gave us the light bulb and the neon sign and the L.E.D. "Turn on the night!," still the essential cry of the Romantics, from Caspar David Friedrich to Kiss, urges us to love in darkness. The light of reason makes searchlights and lighthouses; the love of darkness asks us to adjust our eyes and egos sufficiently to see as owls do. Seek light in the morning; accept the night when it comes. Then call it a day. ◆

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BOOKS

DEATH BECOMES HER

Rebecca Makkai confronts our true-crime obsession.

BY KATY WALDMAN

Maybe it was only a matter of time before the novel took on the podcast. You can barely crack the *Times* without encountering a heady profile of some hot new podcaster; when critics consider how stories are told—or even just use that language, *how stories are told*—they are as likely to be discussing podcasts as books. These same critics may belabor themes (the fugitive nature of truth, the slipperiness of memory) popularized by shows such as "Serial," the 2014 blockbuster, narrated by Sarah Koenig, that investigated the killing of a Maryland girl. The series electrified group chats, provided rich loam for conspiracy theories, and turned hordes of millennials into experts on cell towers. Crucially, it also regarded its own genre, true crime, with ambivalence, wearing its nuance like a finely tailored trenchcoat. By melding suspense and self-awareness, it brought podcasts into a space previously reserved for literature. Eventually, it follows, literature was going to notice.

"I Have Some Questions for You" (Viking), the latest book by Rebecca Makkai, embraces the intricate plotting and emotional heft that made her previous novel, "The Great Believers," a Pulitzer finalist. The new book, a murder mystery set at an élite boarding school, is being marketed as an irresistible whodunnit. But it also joins a growing number of critiques of true crime, with Makkai charging the genre on three counts: exploiting real people for entertainment, chasing gore rather than studying systemic problems, and objectifying victims, most of whom are pretty, white, rich, and "young, as we prefer our sacrificial lambs." This last allegation evokes what Alice Bolin, in her essay collection "Dead Girls" (2018), calls the Dead Girl Show, a modern-day myth in which an investigator develops a "haunted, semi-sexual obsession" with "the highest sacrifice, the virgin martyr." Makkai ironizes a group of true-crime addicts, integrating criticism of the Dead Girl Show into her dead-girl show. This is a risky gambit, and I had, well, some questions for her. Would the novel devolve into writerly self-satire? Or would it try to embody a responsible—perhaps even pleasurable—piece of crime literature?

In her new novel, Makkai models a fresh, more ethical vision of crime writing.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NOAH SHELDON

Early in the book, the protagonist, Bodie Kane, is in a cab going to Granby, New Hampshire, where she will teach a two-week course on podcasting at her old boarding school. Bodie co-hosts a podcast called "Starlet Fever," which reëxamines the lives of women in film. ("You're like, *Everything you know about Judy Garland is wrong*," one of her students says, with a hint of scorn.) In high school, Bodie wore Doc Martens and eyeliner. She was a stage tech who hoarded details about her classmates because, as she says, "I hoped this would help me become more like them, less like myself." But, as Bodie rides toward campus, Makkai hints that she is not the outsider she perceives herself to be. Bodie can read "the scroll of calendar-pretty farmland" in ways that the cabdriver can't; she feels every turn of the road in her muscle memory. Upon arriving, she is stirred to find that her alma mater, a stony vision "locked in ice and salt," looks as if it "had been cryogenically preserved."

Some things have changed, of course. Bodie's podcasting students turn out to be more attractive than she and her classmates ever were—not on a spiritual level, but because of their flawless skin and teeth. ("The dermatologists and orthodontists have finally solved it," Bodie thinks.) They're also alarmingly thoughtful. One girl, Britt, lingers

“The latest research suggests they were covered in feather boas.”

after class to express her reservations about true-crime podcasts: for her project, she’d like to choose a topic that Bodie has suggested—the 1995 murder of a Granby senior—but she’s disturbed by the genre’s tropes. “I see so much fetishizing,” Britt says. “I don’t want to be another white girl giggling about murder.” Bodie understands; she, too, dislikes how victims can “become public property, subject to the collective imagination.” She attempts to steer Britt toward structures, isms, the broader forces at play. “I still wonder how problematic that is,” Britt replies—a line that the reader would be forgiven for hearing as “yada yada yada.” The kid is obviously going to pursue the story.

Bodie’s own interest in the murder isn’t impartial. She knew the victim, Thalia Keith, a popular beauty whose body was found in the school swimming pool. She also knew, more glancingly, Omar Evans, a Black athletic trainer who was blamed and imprisoned for the crime. Both characters rise eerily from her memory: Thalia plays tennis, smells like a woodsy floral perfume from the nineties, and has a ruthless approach to bedbugs. Omar is young, divorced, and a little woo-woo: he “got the football players doing vinyasas” and “would go on about the difference between indica and sativa, would tell injured athletes who returned from the hospital with narcotic painkillers that they should chuck them all.” These details don’t fully reanimate either character, but their tang intimates how much remains out of reach.

For Bodie, the tragedy itself glistens with corrupt romance: “What’s as perfect as a girl stopped dead, midformation?” she muses. “Girl as reflection of your desires, unmarred by her own. Girl as sacrifice to the idea of *girl*. Girl as a series of childhood photographs, all marked with the aura of *girl who will die young*.” The queasy appeal of the Dead Girl Show, Bodie reflects, lies in how it absolves “the bystander, the voyeur, even the perpetrator—they’re all off the hook when the girl was born dead.” In contrast, Bodie, a student of structures, aims to implicate as many people as possible, and so does Makkai. As the title suggests, the novel is addressed to “you”—a decision that both mirrors the confiding, intimate quality of podcasts and places the reader under surveillance.

“You” also refers to a specific person: Dennis Bloch, a gentle, boyish music teacher who took a shine to Bodie in high school. He was “one of the best things about Granby,” Bodie recalls, but she can’t shake the suspicion that he was preying on Thalia, and that he might have been involved in her death. As the murder mystery assumes a #MeToo shape, the tone of the narration sharpens. (“My loyalty was a fierce thing. It was a dangerous thing. But you no longer had it.”) Bodie finds herself reëvaluating her own experience at Granby, seething at the sexist abuse she once accepted as normal. The kid who teased her relentlessly, the kid who grabbed her breast, the kid who pushed her head onto his penis—their offenses seem increasingly grotesque in the long shadow of Thalia’s murder. Bodie considers the possibility that rude jokes and femicide might sprout from a single rotting structure: “I could only now calculate the full, ugly weight of it.”

Makkai sharply conveys the insidiousness of misogyny. But, in blurring the line between dead-girl stories and shitty-man stories, she raises a tricky question: Should the tropes of #MeToo receive the same scrutiny as those of true crime? The issue isn’t about standing up for “fine young men” but about interrogating genres that have the potential to turn revelations of harm into lurid entertainment. At one point, Bodie describes scrolling through gruesome Reddit threads at 3 A.M., famished for something she cannot name. This echoes a subplot about Internet shaming that unfolds after a performance artist, Jasmine, creates a live show based on Bodie’s ex-partner Jerome, whom Jasmine also dated. In the show, Jasmine relates how Jerome pressured her for morning sex, even though she didn’t particularly enjoy it, and how he ordered them pepperoni pizza, forgetting her distaste for pork. She claims that Jerome felt entitled to mistreat her because he was older and a well-connected painter. To Bodie’s disgust, Twitter gleefully elevates Jerome as its villain du jour; he soon resigns from his teaching gig and gets dropped by his gallery.

Jerome is not an especially sympathetic character, and Makkai seems less interested in what justice might look like for him than in parsing the frenzy over the allegations. Bodie finds the outcry almost offensive—“It was like seeing someone hanged for stealing gum when down the street someone else was robbing a bank,” she complains—but, elsewhere, she admits, “I have cared as much . . . about people I haven’t met.” A parallel emerges between murder buffs and dogpilers: both get high on righteousness, the thrill of conjuring monsters to despise. At the same time, the contrast between Jasmine, galvanizing an army of thousands, and Thalia, objectified and voiceless, is inescapable. #MeToo testimony and true-crime entertainment may be analogues, but they are foils in one critical sense: a dead girl can't tell her own story.

Makkai shrewdly sets much of her book in 2018, a point in the arc of #MeToo that felt defined by the painstaking revision of one's memories. "We were, all of us, casting a sharp eye back on the men who'd hired us, mentored us, pulled us into coat closets," Bodie says. "I had to consider now that perhaps you were skilled at subtly eroding boundaries, making adolescent girls feel like adults." The creepy teacher has become an almost mandatory presence in female coming-of-age fiction, from Susan Choi's "Trust Exercise" to Tess Gunty's "The Rabbit Hutch." What distinguishes Makkai's turn is her detective framing: she understands that every high school, with its indelible characters and astronomical-seeming stakes, is a crime scene. A childhood is a closed case; remembering reopens it. "I'd been turning memories of you in the light, looking at their ugly backsides, the filthy facets long hidden," Bodie thinks, of Dennis. What are flashbacks but clues to be read and reread on the way to a theory?

Of course, sometimes the theory dictates the flashback. For crime writers, who have good reason to attend to how this chain of command can fluctuate, deceitful memories have long been a plot staple. Makkai, though, approaches them as a writer curious about psychology. She deftly explores how remembrance can melt into reverie, especially in speculative sections that attempt to reconstruct the scene of Thalia's death. And she nails, too, what it's like to remember: the nimbus around adolescence, the retrospective force field that both intensifies and distorts. (Even the names feel magical: "Robbie Serenho . . . in his gold Granby Ski sweatshirt . . . Bendt Jensen . . . Lancelot to Beth's Guinevere.") For Bodie, much of the past is as tantalizing and irretrievable as the meaning of private jokes in an old yearbook. When memories do snap into focus, they emit a soft spookiness. "I'd forgotten about the light at Granby," Bodie says. "Outside, in winter, it came down in needles; inside, it fell like soup." This beautifully evokes the layered, full-body immersion that occurs when you return to a familiar place, and the weird gravity of an institution like Granby, whose students are transient but whose structures endure. Opening the door to a decrepit bathroom, Bodie immediately recognizes the stalls, the sink. "I couldn't have told you a thing about this bathroom five seconds earlier," she marvels, "and now I recognized every inch."

"I Have Some Questions for You" unfolds as a succession of such moments, in which one has the sense, at the edges of awareness, of a crowd of knocking ghosts. There is the attack of the past; the fever dream of social media; the mad poring over pool measurements, scribbles in a planner, and quarter-century-old photographs. Phrases that begin "the one" recur throughout the book: "the one where her body was never found . . . the one where her body was found in the snow . . . the one where he left her body for dead under the tarp . . . the one where she walked around in her skin and her bones for the rest of her life but her body was never recovered." As the clauses pile up, the victims blur together; Makkai achieves an effect similar to that of "Especially Heinous," a novella by Carmen Maria Machado that relentlessly moves through more than two hundred imagined episodes of "Law & Order: SVU." ("Two underage models are attacked while walking home from a club. . . . A disoriented, naked, pregnant woman is discovered wandering around Midtown. . . . A prostitute is murdered.") Both works highlight the numbing, almost hallucinatory pervasiveness of violence against women, and illustrate how greedily such stories are consumed.

Can true crime be ethical? Makkai introduces Thalia's story as "the one with the swimming pool. The one with the alcohol in the—with her hair around—with the guy who confessed to—right. Yes." But, in those early pages, Makkai is only plotting the distance between what crime writing has been and what it could be. Her patient, evocative character work prevents Omar and Thalia from becoming types. Rather than chasing gore, she takes a wide-angle approach, depicting the exhaustion of standing trial and the indignity of police questioning. Scenes from prison, and glimpses of how Omar's family experienced his loss, alternate with Bodie's revelations about a world in which women are routinely diminished, abused, and killed. The result is not a book that leers at a discrete and unfathomable act of violence but one that investigates, as Britt puts it, "two stolen lives: those of Thalia Keith and Omar Evans."

Makkai also rejects true crime's most seductive feature: the verdict. We finish the novel knowing with near-certainty who killed Thalia and why. But the book's marquee mystery—is the podcast any good?—remains unsolved. On the one hand, Britt follows Bodie's lead in focussing on institutions and procedures, lighting up as a law professor explains the evolution of DNA technology. She refuses to move forward unless she can talk to Omar; she proposes to build the podcast around unanswered questions, such as "What influence did the school have over the State Police?" But the book also vivifies the fact that most (if not all) art and journalism has a predatory element. Bodie doesn't set out to exploit Thalia or Omar, but she proves susceptible to her genre's pulse-pounding charms. "You have to understand," she says to Dennis, describing a crucial moment in the podcast, "with the music underneath, this was quite powerful."

"Serial" listeners will remember the first season's famously inconclusive ending. The facts once "seemed so attainable," Koenig intoned, but "we didn't have them fifteen years ago and we still don't have them now." What "Serial" understood was that true crime fetishizes not just dead girls but intimacy, the sense that we *can* know. In surrendering to remoteness and distance—what can't be seen or decided, whether because of memory's pliancy or people's opacity—the show birthed something new, or seemed to. Makkai, as a fiction writer, draws on a long tradition of open-endedness. For her, suspending judgment is a creative act, inviting the novel's last and most important thrall, in which imagination fills the gaps left by knowledge. By the final page, all options remain alive. "You" hold the knife. It's the perfect crime. ♦

DANCING

FLUIDITY

Justin Peck finds his feet.

BY JENNIFER HOMANS

Peck's new work fuses three famous ballet scores by Aaron Copland.

Two weeks ago, with his new dance, "Copland Dance Episodes," Justin Peck finally became Justin Peck. And New York City Ballet emerged from its post-Balanchine sleep and found, at least for a moment, a new self. We have waited a very long time—through years of bitter disagreement over the company's legacy, through the embattled leadership of Peter Martins, and through season after season of mediocre new ballets that suggested a company unable to move on. More recently, the company suffered a spate of egregious #MeToo scandals and embarked on a long-overdue racial reckoning.

Peck grew up in this era. He arrived at the School of American Ballet in 2003, when he was fifteen; joined N.Y.C.B. as a dancer four years later; and soon began making dances. In 2014, he became the company's resident choreographer. With early works such as "Year of the Rabbit" (2012), to a score by Sufjan Stevens, Peck became an instant star and an avatar for his generation. Here was a choreographer, it seemed, who had a fresh dance vocabulary—classical but relaxed, easy, and flowing.

In the years that followed, Peck seemed bent on inventing a new American dance vernacular, even as the idea of America itself seemed to be shattering. His work turned quaint and repetitive. There were too many basic steps and self-conscious "street" moves, often with the dancers performing in sneakers and expensive casual wear. His choice of music—indie rock, electronica—pushed him further into popular forms. He worked on Broadway, too, and although he produced some rousing group dances in "Carousel" and in Steven Spielberg's film version of Jerome Robbins's "West Side Story," the work remained squarely conventional.

"Copland Dance Episodes," Peck's first full-evening ballet, thus comes as a welcome surprise. It builds on a version he made in 2015 of Aaron Copland's "Rodeo," composed in 1942 for the choreographer Agnes de Mille. To this he adds new dances to two other famous Copland ballet scores—"Appalachian Spring" (originally choreographed by Martha Graham, in 1944) and "Billy the Kid" (choreographed by Eugene Loring, in 1938)—and also "Fanfare for the Common Man," as a curtain-raiser. Peck stitches the works together into a single dance of twenty-two episodes, and he strips out all the narrative and Americana. There are no cowboys, no Shakers, no props or plot, just eighty minutes of full-out dancing—what Peck recently called a "ballet binge watch."

The first thing we see is a front drop painted by Jeffrey Gibson, an artist of Choctaw-Cherokee heritage: a geometric arrangement whose psychedelic colors and bold contrasts announce the palette of the show. Down the sides are the words "THE ONLY WAY OUT IS THROUGH," a quote, slightly tweaked, from Robert Frost's poem "A Servant to Servants" (1914), about a poor New England woman who grows attached to workers who camp on her land.

The curtain rises on a striking tableau of dancers in frozen poses and cocooned in mesh, as if they had been put in storage, or hadn't quite been born yet. They disappear, but the tableau will return later, with the dancers uncocooned—a reminder, perhaps, of the past they are going "through" to get "out." For the rest of the ballet, the dancers wear bright two-piece costumes. Each has two colors—top and bottom—and no two are colored alike. It is Orwell for our time: everyone is different, but nobody is more different than anyone else. The *group* is the thing; individuals don't really exist.

The lighting, designed by Peck's longtime collaborator Brandon Stirling Baker,

ILLUSTRATION BY PING ZHU

is key to the show. The drops at the back of the stage and the wings are bleach white and seemingly lit from all directions, and, unusually, the floor is white, too. The result is a space that is almost shockingly bright—I have never seen such a bright stage. Even Peck's previous "Rodeo" staging appears transformed in this light, which gives the illusion throughout of absolute transparency, as if space and air could be naked and exposed. This is a realm in which all will be revealed and nothing can hide, a place of no horizons, obstacles, or boundaries. Everything—costume, design, dance, even music—comes together in tight synchrony under this light, giving the ballet an almost utopian feel.

Each of the dances that rush into this pristine space flows into the next. The choreography is technically demanding, but it is also deliberately plain, wide and generous, with arms held and curved in swooping naturalistic movements. After watching one sequence, Peck apparently commented, "This is way too choreographed," so he reworked the dance.

Peck's great skill has always been his facility at moving large numbers of people around a stage, and in this piece, with a cast of thirty, he outdoes himself. He mostly stays away from set patterns or straight lines, so that his dancers seem, like birds, to fly in and out of formations, following instinctive paths rather than any obvious logic. This requires an unusual mind, the kind that sees patterns in falling snow. He also likes clumps of bodies stuck together, which then unwind and scatter. Intimacy is rare, and, like a kid who cracks jokes because he is ill at ease, Peck at times resorts to childish tricks, such as a tall guy staring down a short guy, or a ready, set, go! line of dancers who then race across the stage.

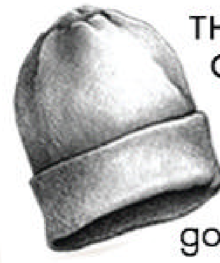
And yet, when his dancers are engaged in pure dancing, we find ourselves faced with something astonishing: they move in ways that appear completely asexual and ungendered, and their bodies seem uncannily without impediments, as if their joints and limbs were fluid, without friction or anxiety. There's plenty of pointe work for women and bravura jumps for men, but the feminine and masculine styles foundational to ballet are somehow made neutral. It is not just that they all partner one another regardless of gender; it is that they all share a movement vocabulary. Chun Wai Chan, a beautifully clear and unaffected dancer, for example, leads a group of men in a lyrical dance full of steps more traditionally assigned to women.

Points of contact between bodies are slippery and smooth. In duets between the extraordinary Taylor Stanley and Mira Nadon, we see the familiar love rituals of hands taken or a head laid on a shoulder, but they perform these motions without a hint of sensuality or eroticism, secrets or seductions. All of that has vanished from their bodies. None of this seems like a deprivation; to the contrary, I have never seen them look so free.

What we are witnessing, I think, is a deep internal shift in the way these dancers think about their own bodies. There seems to be no external eye, no objectifying watcher; there is only them dancing, from the inside. That is one reason that the form—the skin, limbs, torso—looks so liquid. It is an inside-out and body-first approach: a kind of physical thinking that rides the wave of a movement without prior calculation or instruction. They just go. Even pain—in an episode called "The Split," when Stanley and Nadon separate—is a formal problem. They convulse alternately on a series of drumbeats: the movement is the feeling.

We might say that this newfound freedom comes at the price of a narrowed human spectrum, but that is surely the point. And it is why this dance seems to draw a line between the old N.Y.C.B. and the new. Finally, there is no sight of Balanchine, Robbins, or Martins—only Peck and his dancers. Perhaps this also explains Peck's choice of Copland's most innocent music. Peck doesn't have an ironic bone in his body, and he may have needed an open range, a place to camp on Copland's land; there is something escapist about the " 'tis the gift to be simple" nature of this dance, even as it insists on new bodies and beings.

But Peck is not dogmatic, and, just as I was tiring of the sameness and the bright lights, he scattered the dancers back into the wings, letting Copland's last note strike an empty stage: light, white, bright. They had been themselves in this strong sun, and that was enough to make their ballet its own modern American fairy tale. ♦



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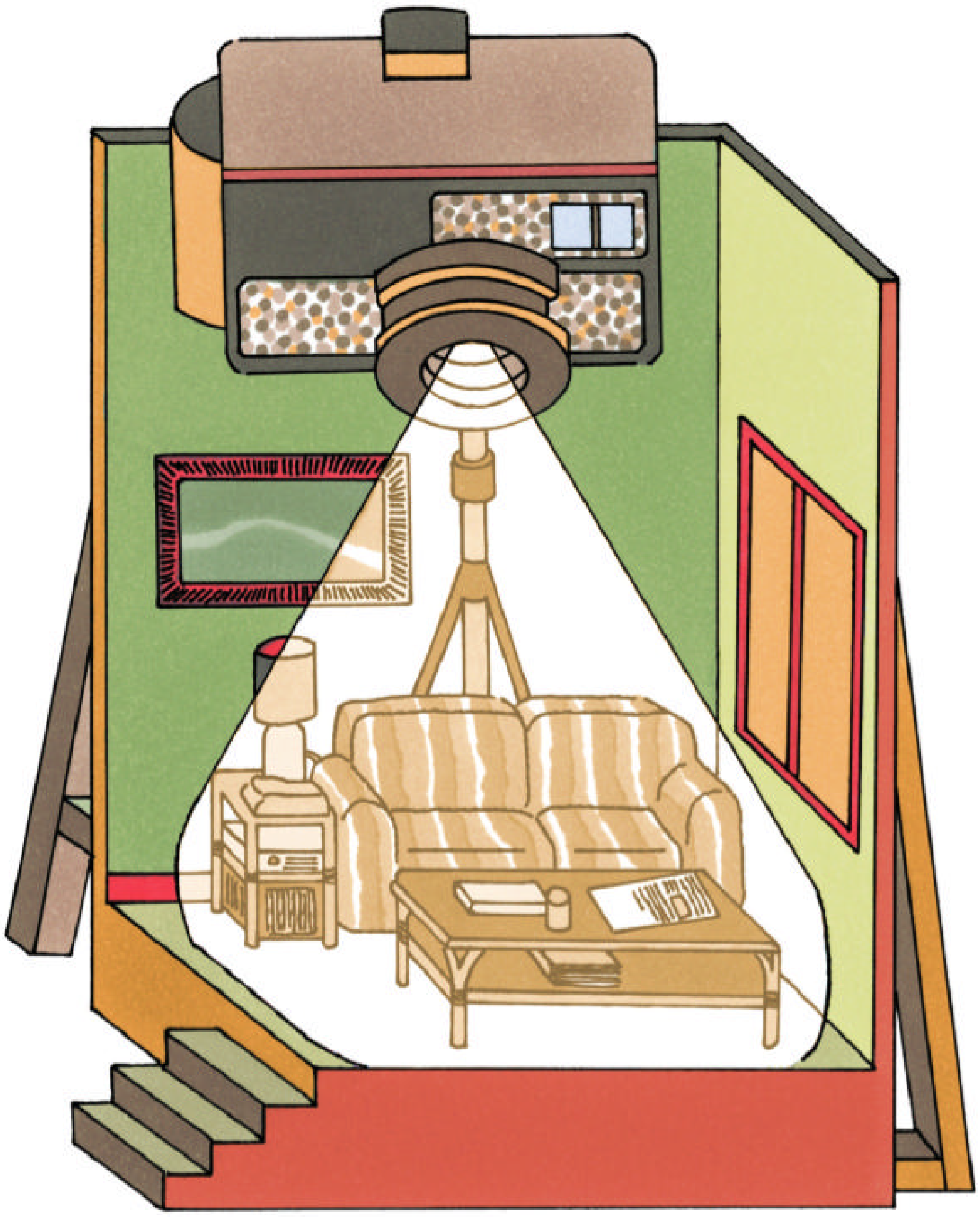
THE THEATRE

OUT OF FOCUS

"Pictures from Home" and "Cornelia Street."

BY HELEN SHAW



Larry Sultan's groundbreaking photo-memoir, from 1992, is recast for Broadway.

Nathan Lane and Danny Burstein are Broadway veterans and consummate showmen, greeted as beloved tummlers whenever they appear onstage. Purveyors of the same wry bonhomie, these two throwbacks to the vaudevillian era could almost be brothers—Lane is sixty-seven to Burstein's fifty-eight—but in "Pictures from Home," at Studio 54, they play father and son. What to do? The production has decided to fake an age gap with hair styling: a white swoosh for Lane and a glossy dark emo-coif for Burstein. Whenever my mind wandered, I watched the lights play on these oddly reflective hairpieces. The shine—Burstein's head occasionally turns a kind of bronzy purple—isn't only a question of wigs. It also illuminates the deeper trouble with the playwright Sharr White's stage adaptation of the photographer Larry Sultan's book, an endeavor that, in its follicles, is a case of tonal mismatch.

The idea, at least, was a good one. White was inspired to dramatize Sultan's "Pictures from Home," from 1992, after seeing a retrospective of his work at LACMA. Sultan's groundbreaking photo-memoir includes nearly a decade's worth of portraits of his parents at their house in Los Angeles; stills from Super-8 home movies; and meditative commentary by Sultan and his folks, which reveals biographical detail and, at times, his father's impatience with the quasi-documentary project. Sultan, who died in 2009, was a photographer who thought theatrically. In a picture titled "Los Angeles, Early Evening," he captures his father standing in a glowing yellow window behind a vivid proscenium-like frame of a pink flowering shrub and a bare tree. In a separate text, Sultan remembers a time in the mid-fifties when a movie company used the family's house for a television commercial: "I thought that all of the neighbors who were crowded into our driveway were there to watch our house become a movie star." All through "Pictures," he engages with his parents' house as if it were a Hollywood soundstage that served only two celebrities.

White turns this memoir into a memory play by having Burstein-as-Larry talk directly to the audience while being constantly interrupted by his parents, Irv (Lane) and Jean (Zoë Wanamaker, underused). While Larry tries to get his shots, his parents negotiate their bickering relationship, which may have been unbalanced by Jean's success as a real-estate agent and Irv's retirement from corporate life. The elder Sultans also tell us what they think about having their son invade their privacy, and much of their criticism of his fixation on images is trenchant. "The *image* of success, Larry, didn't buy you every fucking thing you had your entire life," Irv snaps. "*Actual* success did." But too often the complexity of Sultan's photographs and words has been downgraded, by White and by the actors' audience-courting ingratiation, to a sugary, formulaic family comedy. For instance, when Larry tries to explain how he's using photography to engage with his parents' mythologizing, Irv responds to his statement with italicized disbelief. "Let me tell you a secret about jobs," Irv says to his grown son, whose artistic pursuits don't strike Mr. ex-V.P. of sales for Schick as fundamentally serious. "If nobody can fire you from doing something, then it's *not a job.*" Lane's comic exasperation is, of course, calibrated to an inch—the audience laughs. This is Lane; it would be impossible not to. But we're meant to believe that there's friction between the men, a radical disjuncture of generations, and here they're a double act.

ILLUSTRATION BY MARCO QUADRI

The play drives doggedly toward reconciliation—White puts Larry's weeping admission that he wants his parents to "live forever" at its climax. The book is more ambiguous; Sultan's prefatory statement that the project "has more to do with love than with sociology" still acknowledges a certain anthropological detachment. And while sentiment and shtick have their place on Broadway, they buckle under the power of Sultan's pictures. The director Bartlett Sher has images from the book projected onto an enormous blank wall (Michael Yeargan designed the simple interior; Ben Pearcy did the projections), and these mammoth photographs both make the production and overwhelm it. Their presence gives us too much of our own agency: where, in a photo of his mother, Larry tells us to perceive worry about her husband, some might see irritation with her son.

It's also risky to show us the originals. Lane's broad hamminess looks nothing like Irv's commanding presence in the pictures, and Burstein's version of Larry, full of pleading lovability, could never have prompted the umbrage we see on the (real) parents' faces when they're caught by a camera lens. Then there's the fact that Sultan's sometimes staged portraiture is exquisitely composed in a way that the production isn't. His pieces gleam with a baked Southern California palette: jacaranda light, golf-course-green carpeting, and the parents' burnished, teak-dark tans. Yeargan's big empty living room, lit by Jennifer Tipton, looks cold by contrast. But although I found the show disappointing, I still wouldn't tell you not to see it. It introduced me to Sultan's work, which knocked me sideways, just as it once did White. The poignance of the photographer's archive, and the representational questions that Sultan addresses, survive much of the wrongheaded treatment. As long as the pictures are up there, radiant on the wall, no one can stop you from looking at them.

Speaking of authentic representation, "Cornelia Street," the new musical at Atlantic Stage 2, is about as authentic a slice of New York as a plastic baguette. To write it, the British playwright Simon Stephens seems to have done very little research into the lives of New Yorkers, or, really, into the way people speak, interact, or earn money. This bizarrely misfiring show, with thudding music and lyrics by Mark Eitzel—his third collaboration with Stephens—features a cook (Norbert Leo Butz) named Jacob, who works in a West Village café that might not survive a building sale. Jacob's teen-age daughter, Patti (Lena Pepe), lives with him in a sublet above the restaurant, while his thinly imagined friends and regulars swarm the tables: Sarah (Mary Beth Peil), the free-spirited older dame who used to dance at Studio 54; William (George Abud), the cabbie who's a psychopathic menace (hmm, sounds familiar); a guy who works with computers (Ben Rosenfield); and Misty (Gizel Jiménez), Jacob's estranged stepdaughter, who enters hating his guts, then immediately stops hating him, moves in, falls for the computer nerd, and . . . Look, at intermission on the day I saw the show, a woman stood up and said, "Is there a narrative we're supposed to be following here?"

I did try to give "Cornelia Street" the benefit of the doubt, despite its strange disregard for human behavior. Neil Pepe, the artistic director of the Atlantic Theatre Company, directed it; Butz, a Broadway vet, flings himself into the part, body and soul, and Jiménez has the voice of an angry angel. But nearly every line is nonsense. Early in Act II, Jacob, who has begun taking his chefing more seriously in a bid to class up the joint, tells Patti, proudly, "I started making the guacamole myself." Who doesn't? Did our food-loving chef just buy a fork? At this point, my thin tether to civility snapped, and I floated to the dark side—the worse "Cornelia Street" got, the more I took pleasure in its ridiculousness.

I was, therefore, beside myself by the time we reached the song "Dance." William is mocking Jacob for trying to prove himself, and Sarah says, "You want to prove yourself to people? You should take me dancing." That is, certainly, a bonkers non sequitur, but it does get us into the song, whereupon everyone in the café bounces around to these lyrics: "Dance like you finally forget / Dance like the saint doing bad deeds / Throw those thighs around." While the actors (who deserve better) throw their thighs around, they sing about the different ways you can dance. Dance "like they got you by the balls," a customer suggests. "Dance like a pipe about to blow," a waiter recommends. Say what you will about these lyrics, I have been obsessed since I saw "Cornelia Street" with the idea of dancing like a pipe. How would that work? Perhaps you stand very still, waiting for the plumber to show up. Finally, after a lifetime, a dance I can do. ♦

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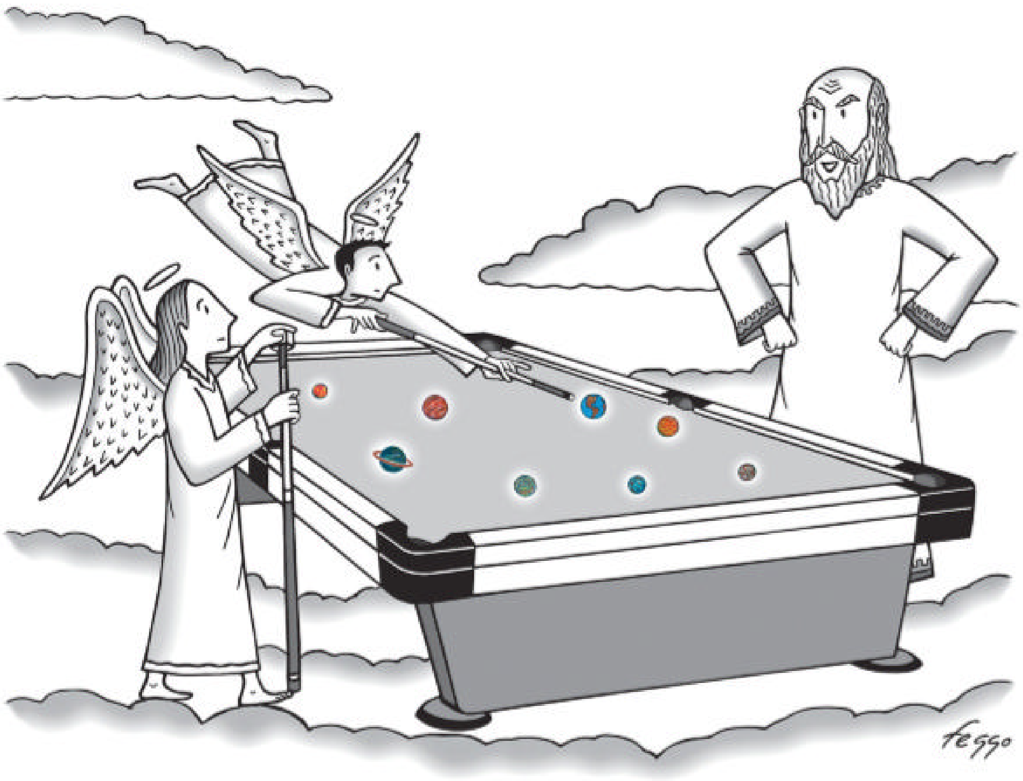
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Felipe Galindo, must be received by Sunday, February 26th. The finalists in the February 6th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 13th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

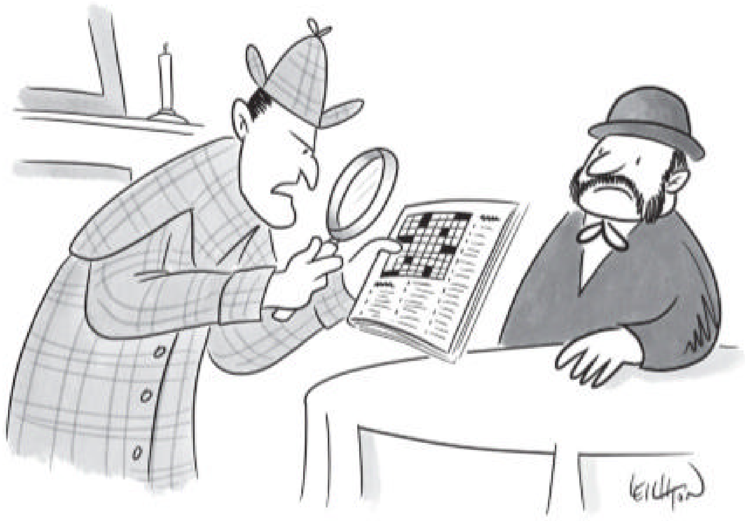
THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ”

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

THE FINALISTS

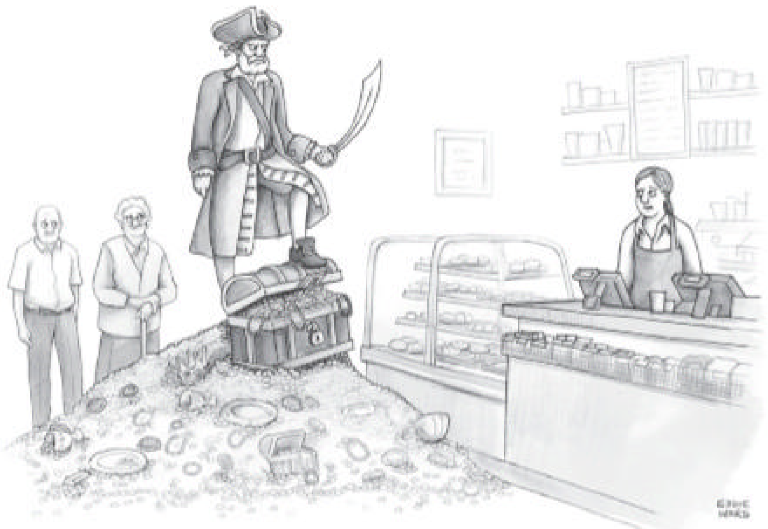


“Oh, God. I think there's a theme.”
Frank Poppe, Washington, D.C.

“It's almost as if they want me to solve it.”
Rachel Belinfante, London, England

“Why couldn't he have been murdered on a Monday?”
Ken Park, San Francisco, Calif.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“If you're going to bury that here, you need to buy something.”
Stephen Aslett, Houston, Texas

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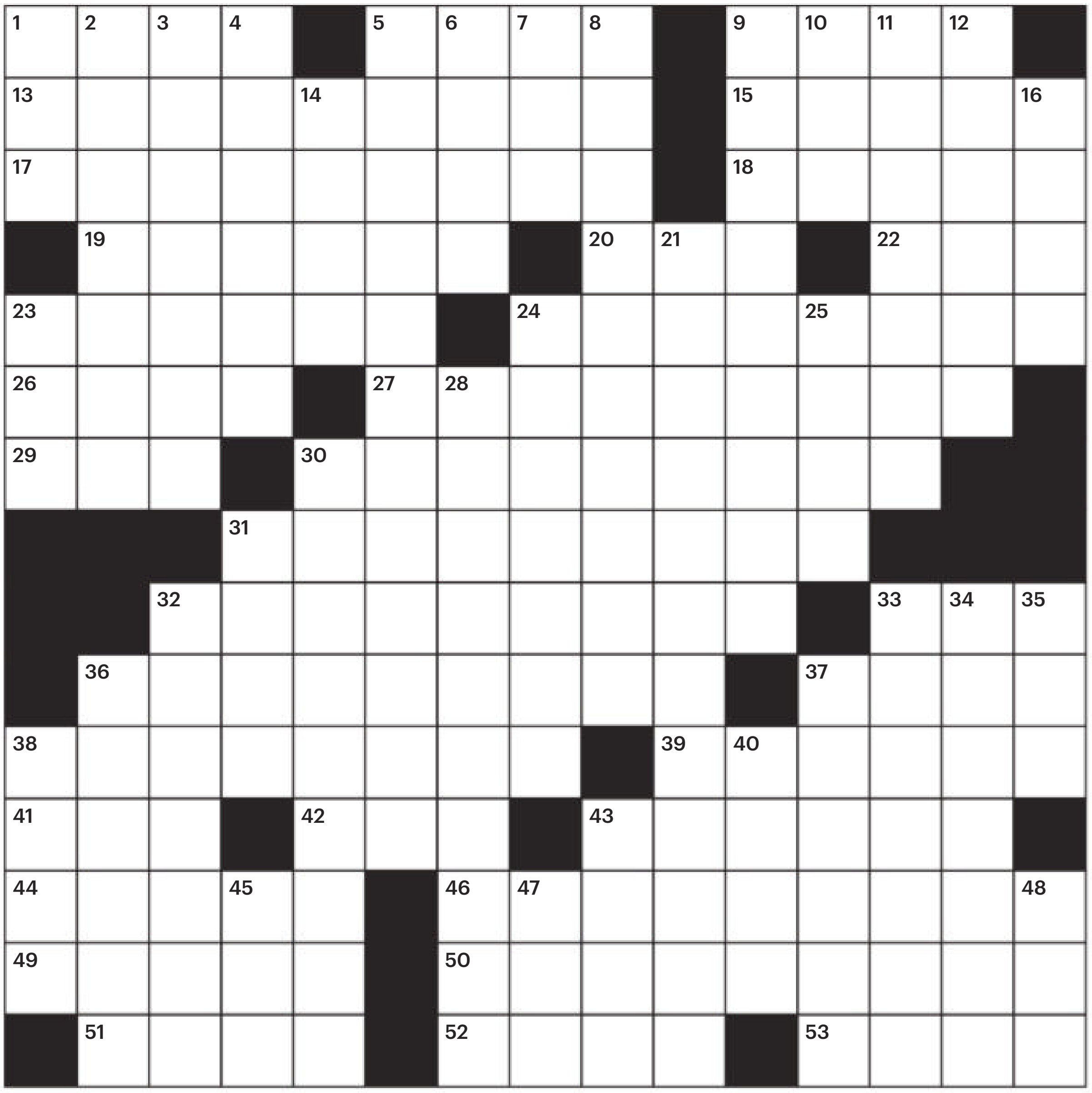
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A challenging puzzle.

BY PAOLO PASCO



ACROSS

1 Birds that lay dark green eggs
5 One-to-one, maybe
9 ___ Lydia ("The Testaments" narrator)
13 Tell about
15 Beta testers, at times
17 Prettied up a portrait, perhaps
18 "Quit dragging your feet"
19 Study-guide subheadings
20 Classic car with a Coke-bottle body
22 Designer of the former Penn Station sculpture "Eclipsed Time"
23 Opulent
24 Hasbro weapons
26 Stoneboat-pulling animals
27 Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, for two
29 Any of the "Stranger Things" kids, in brief
30 One with a bill voted on by U.S. lawmakers?
31 Disney attraction featuring C-3PO and R2-D2 as guides
32 They're raised for drinks
33 Hub whose Web site contains information on M.T.A. services
36 Internet buzzword that's virtually everywhere?
37 A ___ to go
38 Towed transports without wheels
39 Reserves
41 Post-op stop
42 "See attached" subject, often
43 Marks around an aside, for short
44 Japanese breed that Helen Keller is credited with first bringing to the United States
46 Ruining, as an outdoor date
49 Follower of *domingo*
50 Take in a paper
51 Cooped
52 Contents of a container with S/M/T/W/T/F/S compartments
53 Sommer who starred in "The Oscar" but has never won an Oscar

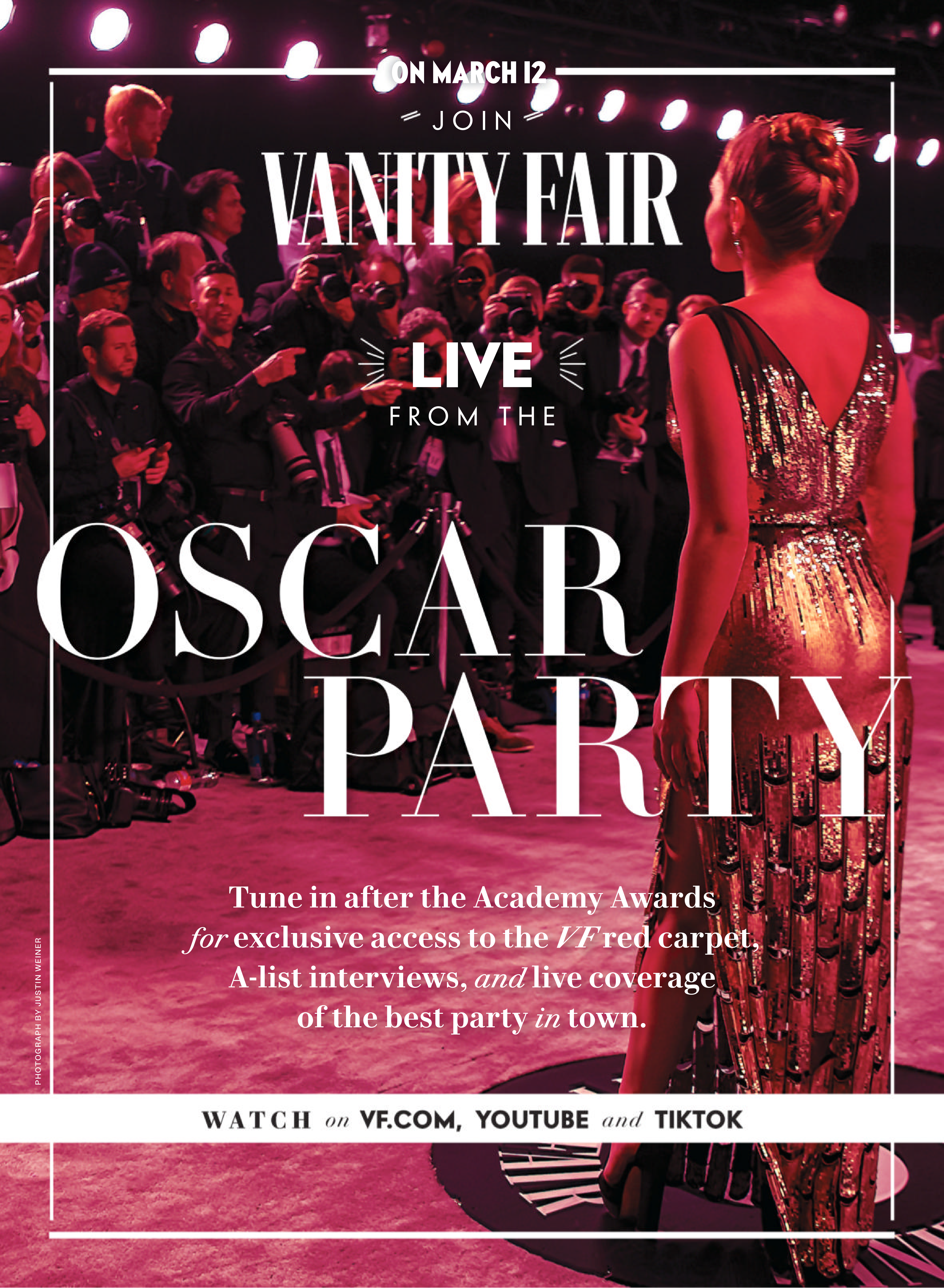
DOWN

1 ___ meter (ghost hunter's device)
2 One breaking up some beef, maybe?
3 Expose
4 Get off the sidelines
5 Needing a hand?
6 Stops on the side of the road, maybe
7 *Solstice d'___*
8 Onetime Honda Civic competitors
9 Events that might draw lots to lots
10 Grp. that sent Ann-Margret to Vietnam
11 Legendary textile worker whose name is now associated with technophobes
12 Real drags at weddings?
14 Terse confirmation
16 Cease and desist, e.g.: Abbr.
21 Acts of homage?
23 Nova ___
24 Talks nineteen to the dozen
25 Signals to stop petting, maybe
28 Left
30 Go by unnoticed
31 D.j.s' sessions
32 Ballroom dance from the Antilles
33 A.L. West player
34 One of a workout pair
35 The "A" in "WAP"
36 Lay out
37 One skewered at a roast?
38 Retro phone component
40 ___-hop (psychedelic music genre)
43 Variegated
45 Highest number in the lyrics to Beyoncé's "Countdown"
47 Word after great or lesser
48 Once called

Solution to the previous puzzle:

A	D	D	E	D	■	C	L	U	B	■	O	R	B	S
S	U	R	R	E	A	L	I	S	T	■	P	A	R	E
L	O	S	A	N	G	E	L	E	S	■	T	H	I	N
■	■	■	S	T	O	A	T	■	■	B	I	R	D	S
A	S	P	■	A	N	T	■	C	H	I	C	A	G	O
P	H	I	L	L	Y	■	L	A	I	D	■	H	E	R
T	O	T	O	■	■	■	A	S	K	E	D	■	■	■
■	T	A	L	K	O	F	T	H	E	T	O	W	N	■
■	■	■	A	U	D	I	T	■	■	■	G	A	G	A
I	D	S	■	D	O	N	E	■	B	O	S	T	O	N
N	E	W	Y	O	R	K	■	B	L	M	■	T	S	A
A	R	I	E	S	■	■	G	L	U	E	D	■	■	■
R	I	P	A	■	N	E	W	O	R	L	E	A	N	S
O	V	E	R	■	O	P	E	N	S	E	C	R	E	T
W	E	D	S	■	W	A	N	D	■	T	O	K	E	N

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at **newyorker.com/crossword**



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